NSPRA's
Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the

Harford County Public Schools
Bel Air, Maryland

January 2008

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Introduction

Goal of the communication audit

Harford County Public Schools enjoys an excellent reputation among the school districts in the State of Maryland. Not only is the district one of the fastest growing in the state, but it is also one of the most successful, with Harford County's students consistently scoring above state and national averages on standardized assessments. In addition to their commitment to academic rigor and accountability, Superintendent Jacqueline C. Haas, Ed.D., and the members of the Board of Education of Harford County are committed to improving communication between the schools and the communities served by the district. This audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the Board and superintendent. It clearly demonstrates their willingness to risk change in order to improve educational opportunities for students by enhancing communication in a focused effort to build support for the schools.

The challenges of maintaining public confidence in a restrictive budget climate, meeting the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse constituency, reaching broad consensus on the educational program, and communicating effectively on emerging issues with all segments of the population affect not only the school system but Harford County as well.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of parents, community members and school employees, it was obvious to the auditors that there is a great sense of "place," community and pride in the school district. Of particular note by the focus groups is the longevity of the district's leadership, the caring and dedicated staff, and innovative teaching practices in the district's classrooms.

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 public relations, marketing and two-way communication with all Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) stakeholders.

The findings and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district's Public Information Office or any other department, they are intended to improve communication in a school district that is committed to addressing the challenges of education in the 21st century.

It is difficult to measure public relations. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program — including a public relations/communication program —

is to determine whether it is helping the school district make progress toward its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the auditors reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of the district's mission, vision and goals.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of HCPS provides an important foundation for developing a strategic communication plan for the district. The audit informs district leaders about community attitudes and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and offers recommendations to expand or enhance 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 19 focus groups, representing a variety of HCPS' internal and external publics. 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 at the HCPS A.A. Roberty Building. Sessions were held October 29-30, 2007, with the following groups:

- Parents
- Volunteers/Parents
- Business Leaders
- Elected Officials
- Civic/Faith Community Leaders
- Retired Administrators
- Support staff (bus drivers, food service, facilities, paraprofessionals)
- Central Office Administrative Assistants/Office Personnel
- School-based Administrative Assistants/Office Personnel
- Teachers (two groups – elementary & secondary)
- Principals (two groups – elementary & secondary)
- Supervisors/Non-teaching Professionals
- Senior Staff
- Students (two groups – high school & middle school)
- Board Members (two groups)

Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school district to view its communications from an "outside" perspective. The consultants for this communication audit were Karen H. Kleinz, APR, NSPRA associate director, and Carol Mowen, APR, NSPRA senior associate. Their vitae are included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the Public Information Office submits samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., newsletters, brochures, reports, etc.) with various audiences. The auditors also review the district and school web sites. These materials and web sites are all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. In addition, the auditors review demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, marketing materials, news clippings, etc.

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

- Assess the effectiveness of HCPS' current communications programming.
- 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.
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and to improve the management of public relations, marketing, communications, and public engagement activities for HCPS.

Following the review of materials and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies HCPS can use to refocus its communication resources to deliver key messages and to improve its overall communication practices. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Director Richard D. Bagin, APR.

Guiding Definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school districts, state and national education organizations and agencies to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, information and communication practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public elations programs:

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

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

Assumptions

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

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

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not 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 the district's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around the country.

Supportive quotes

The auditors took notes in each of the focus group sessions. Participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous and not be directly attributed to them. The focus group summaries are a synopsis of what was said in each group. Some comments are direct quotes from participants, 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 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 to build trust and credibility, we recommend that each focus group participant receive a copy of this report for review and feedback.

Key Findings

The auditors identified several themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. These include the following:

❖ There is a strong sense of community and tradition in Harford County which extends to the school district. HCPS is noted for having stable leadership, a community-oriented focus, and a long-standing commitment to keeping the community informed about the schools.

❖ HCPS is perceived throughout the community as an excellent school system with a strong leadership team and a highly qualified staff of teachers and support personnel. Strengths mentioned by the focus groups include the district's innovative and cutting edge approach to improving education and the excellent return on the taxpayer's investment, often noted as offering a "big bang for the buck." With one of the lowest per pupil expenditures in the state, the academic performance is outstanding. A number of focus group participants said that they moved to Harford County specifically for the schools.

❖ The focus groups consistently cited district publications (print and electronic), e-mail communications, the web site, and personal contacts/word of mouth as the best sources for news and information. *The Aegis* was cited by a few groups as a source of district news, but most did not consider it particularly credible and a majority of participants expressed frustration over the negative focus of its news coverage. The use of the ALERTNOW voice messaging system was universally praised by the focus groups and Edline received praise from secondary staff and parents.

❖ Overall, the focus group participants felt that HCPS does a good job communicating information. Participants noted that *In the Loop*, which is available as a PDF download, is a good summary of Board actions for both internal and external groups. *Inside Track*, the staff e-newsletter, was cited as a good source of information by internal participants. Although the *Harford Schools* newspaper was cited as an excellent "good news" source about the system, most participants noted that the information it contains is dated by the time they receive it. The long history of the *Harford Schools* newspaper (50 years) is respected, but as technology evolves, the focus groups cited the need to make changes to streamline the publication and make it more timely and substantive.

❖ Most of the focus groups found the district web site useful, but many participants felt the site was difficult to navigate. Employee focus groups expressed confusion about the use of InfoWeb (intranet) and SharePoint, and many noted they have difficulty locating the specific information they need. While secondary parents and students appreciate Edline, they noted that not all teachers are consistent in keeping Edline updated, which is a concern.

❖ There was not a clear understanding among the employee focus groups about the various channels or defined protocols for internal communication. Staff participants believe there is a lack of message consistency across the school system and they often feel left out of

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the communication loop, citing a breakdown in the dissemination of information from supervisors and administrators as well as lack of easy accessibility to information. External focus group participants also noted a lack of consistency and standardization in processes, procedures and messages across the schools, citing implementation and use of Edline as an example.

❖ Consistent across the focus groups was a concern that HCPS operates from a reactive rather than a proactive position in communicating about issues (specifically citing recent student health concerns related to MRSA). Focus group participants expressed a strong desire to be kept informed about school safety incidents – at all campuses, not just their child's school – and want to receive information directly from the district, not via their child or the news media. Participants also noted that they would like the district to be more forthcoming in sharing the rationale behind decisions, particularly those related to the budget and academic program.

❖ It is clear from the focus groups and review of materials that HCPS does not have a clearly articulated and organized strategy to market itself and manage its reputation. Focus group participants agreed that the district has great programs that can attract and retain students, but felt that many people in the community might not fully understand the array of programs and opportunities available in the schools. They believe that HCPS would benefit by actively engaging in strategies that reinforce its positive reputation.

❖ Focus group participants noted that HCPS offers many opportunities for parents and community members to become involved in the schools, including committees and advisory groups, PTOs, and other school-based activities. However, there was a perception among some external focus group participants that parent and community involvement is sometimes welcomed only on a limited basis.

❖ Focus group participants expressed a strong desire for more outreach and dialogue with district leaders. A significant number of participants indicated that a need exists to improve the Board's relationship with the community. Related to this is a concern that the Board and administration are not truly open to input and ideas from the community and staff.

❖ Focus group participants identified the following as key challenges facing the district:
  ▪ Funding (local and state).
  ▪ Growth and overcrowding.
  ▪ Older facilities.
  ▪ Base Realignment and Closures (BRAC).
  ▪ Maintaining standards

  Additional Internal Challenges:
  ▪ Keeping up with technology.
  ▪ Meeting the needs of an increasing diverse student population.

Recommendations

The challenges facing HCPS are those facing most progressive school systems across the country today – handling the impact of tighter budgets on programs and facilities; finding and keeping talented teachers, support staff, and administrators; sustaining high student achievement levels and meeting the State of Maryland's Bridge to Excellence mandates and the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act; anticipating and meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse population; and reaching out to parents as well as "empty nesters" and other citizens who are disconnected from the schools.

In response to the findings from the communication audit, this report contains recommendations for enhancing and improving communication with HCPS' internal and external stakeholders. Many of the recommendations address ways to become more strategic with the communications program in order to better support the district's mission, vision and goals.

HCPS is notable for its long-standing commitment to effective communication with stakeholders. The district's Public Information Office was established in 1957. District leaders, past and present, are to be commended not only for being in the vanguard of districts that recognized the importance of good communication, but for continuing to provide resources to support the communication function. HCPS' public information program has served the system well during the past five decades. In today's era of technology-driven communication, however, HCPS must shift its focus from print-driven, one-way information formats to "real time" two-way communication. The recommendations in this report are designed to improve and enhance the existing program, maximize available resources, and take advantage of available technology.

Ultimately, successful school systems in today's rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for achieving success for students. School districts seeking to implement change find it occurs most quickly and efficiently when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. With effective communication, staff members better understand their value to the district and community members understand how they can support the educational program in ways that ensure success for all students.

The recommendations in this report are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to serve as a road map for improving communication and marketing strategies, developing a comprehensive two-way communication program, and building staff and community support. We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs, and it would be unrealistic to expect the Public Information Office staff and schools to take on all these recommendations this year. We advise the Board and administration to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations can be implemented immediately given the staff and resources available and which should be included in long-range plans.

Recommendation 1: Develop a strategic communication plan.

The purpose of a strategic communication plan is to support the district's mission, vision and goals by delivering critical information, aligning key messages with stated goals and building strong relationships with stakeholders. Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective plan or guarantee improved information flow. A well-designed plan will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of the district's communication dollar, demonstrating accountability to stakeholders in the process. It should also focus on engaging stakeholders as well as informing them. Regular formal and informal research, knowing the system, understanding the problems, seeking stakeholders' opinions, evaluating what works and what doesn't, and determining how the system can improve are all important components of the communication effort. Without a plan, it is difficult to create an open dialogue, deliver the messages that are important to stakeholders, and build support for the schools.

The strategic communication plan should be directly tied to the HCPS Strategic Plan and take into account all of the district's significant stakeholder groups (i.e., certificated and classified staff, parents, business, civic and faith community leaders, community members, news media, etc.), the information they need and want to know, and the channels of communication that will be used to reach them. A strategic communication plan is the key ingredient missing from HCPS' overall communication efforts.

The HCPS Public Information Office was founded in an era when most governmental organizations used one-way informational vehicles, such as newsletters and news releases, to keep their publics informed and updated about the activities of the organization. In today's 24/7, instant-access information environment, the public has become much more sophisticated about the type and quality of communication they desire. And they are demanding "real time" answers and updates on issues and actions that touch their child, their school or their wallet, along with a voice in decision-making. Today's successful communication programs, be they for school systems or for private companies, seek to engage stakeholders in two-way communication targeted to their needs.

An effective communication plan includes the four-step public relations process of research, planning, communication and evaluation, and addresses the following questions for every action or activity the district undertakes:
1. Who needs to know?
2. What do they need to know?
3. Why do they need to know?
4. When do they need to know?
5. How are we going to communicate this information to them?
6. What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
7. How will we evaluate the outcomes?

While focus group participants commended the Public Information Office for being service-oriented in responding to communication and customer-service related needs, most perceive the office as the source of publications and as being responsible for managing media-

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related functions. There is a need to establish a clear connection between communication and student achievement and to develop an understanding among all employees about the responsibility they each have as communicators and HCPS ambassadors.

A strategic communication plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the district's communication efforts if all projects and activities are considered in terms of whether or not they support the Board's set goals. A well-defined communication plan builds understanding and staff involvement in communication efforts by providing clear direction and encourages telling the district's story in "one clear voice." A comprehensive plan also helps to ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm large school systems.

The recommendations in this Communication Audit Report can be used as the framework for developing the new plan. However, it must be remembered that a plan is just that — it should be dynamic and not viewed as set in concrete. It will need to be revised and adapted as objectives are accomplished and new communication challenges arise.

The Public Information Office should work with administrators and others responsible for various components of the Board's goals to assist them with the implementation of communication strategies that support their efforts. This kind of solid communication planning will help HCPS become more proactive in telling its story and maintaining the strong community support it currently enjoys.

In addition to the overall strategic communication plan, specific communication plans should be developed in detail for any major initiatives or projects. Specific communication opportunities for HCPS that warrant individual communication plans include: the opening of two new schools and redistricting plans; the impact of BRAC (Base Realignment And Closures); and block scheduling.

Many of the recommendations in this report are components of a strategic communication plan. For example, HCPS needs an organized effort to market its schools and programs. The marketing plan recommendation should fit under and complement the overall communication plan. NSPRA can provide samples of strategic communication plans on request.

Recommendation 2: Transition the focus of the Public Information Office from information delivery to strategic communications and engagement.

There is no doubt that the Public Information Office is dedicated in its communication efforts and focus group participants consistently noted the service-oriented attitude of staff and their efforts to deliver positive news about the schools. Their responsiveness to the needs of the local news media and their efforts to provide informative publications for stakeholders is commendable. Director of Public Information Don Morrison is a highly visible and credible spokesperson for HCPS, and under his direction the Public Information program has met the district's communication needs for many years.

However, with changing community needs and expectations for timely and comprehensive communication with the schools, as well as for opportunities to have a voice in decision-making, a program heavily focused on one-way information delivery is no longer as effective in serving the communication needs of the district and the community. Communications research has demonstrated that the news media and publications are useful for creating awareness and providing basic information, but credible, two-way communication is needed to change attitudes. As part of the development of a strategic communication plan, we recommend that HCPS shift the primary focus of the office from information dissemination to two-way communication focused on building relationships and active community engagement in the schools.

The communication effort should focus on supporting the HCPS Strategic Plan and demonstrating accountability to stakeholders by communicating progress, successes and challenges related to the district's mission, vision and goals. As noted above, it should be designed to encourage two-way dialogue between the community and the district and focus on building supportive relationships and active citizen engagement in the education process.

We believe there are several components necessary to making this transition in HCPS:

- HCPS first needs to develop a clear vision — and expectations — for its communication program. At present the Public Information Office attempts to be responsive to a myriad of internal and external audiences and the staff is involved in a multitude of communication activities, both strategic and tactical. The office handles numerous media requests, internal communication, web site content and graphics, special events coordination, recognition programs, constituent relations, building-level PR assistance, parent communication, cable TV and radio programming, front office reception and the mail room, as well as other miscellaneous support activities.

  The day-to-day communication demands alone of a large and complex school system can easily consume staff time. Such demands also leave little time or resources for strategic planning and evaluation. This often results in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering the system's key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools. Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. When "urgent communication" becomes the focus, proactive communication opportunities that support the district's overall mission and goals are missed.

  As part of clarifying the vision for the communications function and building understanding of the role of the Public Information Office, HCPS leadership can use this communication audit report in conjunction with the HCPS Strategic Plan to determine critical communication, marketing and engagement priorities. Once a vision is articulated, staff can begin to develop a strategic communications plan (see Recommendation 1) and identify the timelines and resources that will be needed to implement the plan.

- Once a vision and expectations for communication are established, the next step is to review and evaluate the current job descriptions and responsibilities of the Public Information Office staff in terms of how they relate to that vision and to the recommendations in this report, as well as to the HCPS Strategic Plan. A thorough review will likely identify functions that have changed or responsibilities that have been added which impact the ability of the staff to deliver strategic, targeted communication that supports HCPS' mission, vision and goals. It may also indicate areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that need more support. Not only will this help in focusing the work of the office, it will also help to ensure that the Public Information Office does not become a "catch all" for tasks that might better belong in other departments.

    A second review should be conducted after a strategic communication plan has been developed and revisions should be made to the job descriptions to ensure that staff time is focused on projects and activities that support the goals and objectives of the plan as well as the HCPS Strategic Plan. For example, at present, the Director of Public Information spends a significant amount of his time on publication preparation and media relations. This leaves him little time to develop more strategic communication programs and activities.

    As the senior communications administrator, the focus of the director position should be on proactive communication planning and engagement; crisis communication and strategic media relations; marketing and reputation management; public relations counsel to district and school leaders; and overall supervision of the Public Information Office staff. Our research shows that a strong working relationship between the superintendent and the senior communications administrator is critical to a successful communication effort; therefore we believe it is extremely important that the director position report directly to the superintendent and serve as a member of the Senior Staff leadership team. (Go to www.nspra.org/cap.htm for research reports.)

    It is essential for the director to understand the pros and cons that are discussed during any planning or decision-making process, as well as the final outcome, in order to create an effective framework for communicating issues and to be a knowledgeable, credible spokesperson for the district. Research conducted for NSPRA's Communication Accountability Project (go to www.nspra.org/cap.htm for more information) supports the importance of communication as a management function and highlights the need for the communications director to have direct access to, and a strong working relationship with, the superintendent and leadership team. As the public relations/communications counselor to the superintendent, Board and Senior Staff, the director should interpret public attitudes, identify potential controversies and response strategies, and recommend communication strategies that build stakeholder understanding of district challenges as well as successes.

    All positions in the office should be reviewed and evaluated in a similar fashion in order to align tasks and responsibilities so that they directly relate to communication goals and support and complement the efforts of the director. This will help to provide direction,

streamline the efficiency of the office, and enhance the effectiveness of communication efforts.

- A final component of transitioning the Public Information Office to a more comprehensive and strategic communication function is to rename it to more accurately reflect the role and function it serves. There are a variety of possibilities that exist, including:
    - Communications and/or Community Relations
    - Community and Public Relations
    - Communications and Community Engagement
    - Community (or Public) Affairs
    - Communications and Community Services
    - Communications and Marketing
    - Communication Services

  All of these department names indicate that there is a two-way component to the communication effort, demonstrating HCPS' desire to do more than just provide information, but also to actively engage stakeholders in the education process.

Recommendation 3: Become more proactive and systematic with communication efforts.

One of the challenges in any school system is staying on top of what is happening in schools across the district in order to be proactive with communication. External audiences want information about schools in their neighborhoods; internal audiences want to know why their school program isn't in the news as well as what is going on at other school sites. No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community. The challenge is making sure information is relevant, readily available and offered in easily accessible formats.

According to the focus groups, district publications, the web site and word-of-mouth via personal contacts are the best sources of information about HCPS. The key is ensuring that these communication vehicles are being used effectively to tell the district's story and deliver key messages. The following strategies have proven effective in helping to systematize communication efforts:

- **Conduct regular research on communication and marketing efforts.** In today's media-oriented society, information overload is a problem not just in the workplace, but at home as well. Information must be of interest and value to target audiences in order to catch their attention. Communication research helps to identify what stakeholders know or don't know; what information they want to receive; key audiences for specific messages; and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. Before expending resources on redesigning or creating new publications or marketing programs, research should be conducted to determine what is currently working or not working, user preferences and messages that resonate.

Following the completion of any major project or initiative, the district should evaluate its success and determine which communication strategies worked well and which could be improved in the future. Research-based communication will support HCPS' efforts to deliver quality education and build solid relationships with key stakeholder groups. This communication audit is a significant start that will guide HCPS in developing a strategic communications plan, but on-going research will be needed in ensure that communication remains relevant and effective.

Research does not have to be expensive or require a trained researcher. There are a number of effective strategies that the Public Information Office and other departments can implement with a minimum amount of effort. Some suggestions include:

- **Readership surveys of district and school newsletters** –We recommend HCPS conduct regular readership surveys of publications – print and electronic – in order to stay in touch with what information parents, community members, and staff are truly interested in. Schools should also conduct readership surveys of their building-level newsletters. The primary focus of publications should be to deliver news and information about the local schools and the district based on what stakeholders have said they want to know.

  The surveys can be simple, but the goal is to determine whether people are reading each publication and if they find it valuable. If not, the publication should be eliminated and the money invested in other communication activities. A readership survey can also provide guidance on the type of information to expand in the publication. The primary focus of publications should be to deliver news and information about the local schools and the district based on what parents say they want to know. We suggest surveys be conducted early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes. Surveys can be conducted online, by including an insert or tear-off page in print publications, or, at the school-level, by distributing to parents at parent-teacher conferences or open houses.

- **Focus groups** – Focus groups with parents, staff and community members can also be used to gage readership of publications and web sites, as well as for a variety of other issues. They can be informal (by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions of a group already meeting on another topic) or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative the district is considering. For example, HCPS may want to conduct some focus groups to determine messages and strategies for communicating about BRAC.

- **Exit/entrance surveys** – Short surveys administered to parents when withdrawing or enrolling students in schools can provide valuable information for marketing and communication planning. Similar surveys can also be administered to staff. These surveys should be designed to find out why they are leaving or what brought them to the district, what their expectations were or are, how best to communicate with them, etc. This information can also help identify specific

schools or departments where communication needs to be improved and can help HCPS build messages into its ongoing communication program that will combat misperceptions and create positive comparisons for the schools. The data could also provide information on programs HCPS might consider that would keep students in the district.

- **Satisfaction/climate surveys** – Community satisfaction surveys are helpful in gathering feedback from parents, students and staff. The district may want to consider conducting a satisfaction/climate survey every few years to create a baseline for evaluating changes in perceptions about the district and schools. In addition to asking respondents to rate school performance and general satisfaction with communication, we would suggest asking additional questions that are more specific as to the information parents want and the format they would like to receive it in.

- **Voice poll technology** – Another effective way to survey parents and community members is voice poll telephone technology. Used regularly, this is an excellent way to gather feedback from staff, parents, students and the public. The system can be used in a variety of ways — for satisfaction surveys, determining expectations the community has for the schools, discovering the level of support for a new policy or curriculum program, or to identify emerging issues and concerns (i.e., boundary changes, safety). It can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a specific marketing campaign, initiative, or program and to determine whether key messages are reaching identified audiences. The ALERTNOW notification system provides a voice poll function that could be further explored by HCPS.

- **Measurable objectives** – In order to maximize research data, the strategic communications plan must include measurable objectives for each goal. This will allow the district to determine whether a communication activity is successful, in need of additional resources, or should be eliminated. As an example: Measurable objective: *Hold two one-hour media relations training sessions for administrators that are evaluated as beneficial by 80% percent of the attendees*. Non-measurable objective: *Hold media relations training sessions for administrators.*

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Employee focus group participants indicated that important information does not always cascade throughout the system in a timely manner and messages are sometimes inconsistent from school to school or between departments. Some suggestions for effectively disseminating key messages internally include:
  - ✓ Communicate messages to staff via face-to-face meetings, *Inside Track* or e-mails, etc.

- ✓ Provide opportunities for staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.
- ✓ Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media.
- ✓ Include messages as headings on district and school web sites and publications.
- ✓ Share key messages with parent leaders and key communicators.

- **Include district news and key messages in school newsletters and web sites.** 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. Schools are a natural center for communication with parents and neighborhoods and should be a major component of the communication effort. Including a district news section in school newsletters is an effective way of getting important information in front of parents. The Public Information Office could prepare brief information inserts and e-mail them to the schools to drop into school newsletters. This is one of the most effective ways to reach parents with key messages and operational information about the district and should become a standard feature in school newsletters.

  The district news section should contain information stakeholders desire as determined through research (see first bullet above). This might include:
    - ✓ How HCPS is managing the budget to obtain the maximum benefit for students;
    - ✓ Updates on progress toward strategic goals and objectives;
    - ✓ Information on student achievement, Maryland's Bridge to Excellence mandates and NCLB;
    - ✓ Reports on policy/curriculum decisions and other Board action items; and
    - ✓ Updates on issues impacting the district (i.e., BRAC).

  Focus group participants also strongly indicated that they want to know the rationale behind decisions made by the Board and administration and the outcomes of issues and projects they have provided input on.

  Web sites should also be used to disseminate key messages. While each individual school homepage links back to the district's web site, a more effective strategy would be to include a "What's New in HCPS" button on each school's homepage that would catch the user's attention and, once clicked, link directly to new district information and key district messages. By including a direct link on school sites, you increase the chance that the information will be read since the reader doesn't have to change web sites and search for the information. (See Recommendation 12 for more suggestions on improving the district and school web sites.)

- **Expand two-way communication with key communicators and opinion leaders.** We recommend that HCPS consider fine-tuning its outreach efforts by developing a formal key communicator network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with influential members of the community who in turn can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of "ambassadors" for the district. Although

current technology has made it easy and convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of people in a timely fashion, it does not replace the value and effectiveness of face-to-face communication with a small of group of influential community/staff opinion leaders.

Dr. Haas and the Board have developed a solid grassroots community network through a variety of citizen advisory committees, councils and groups such as the Harford County Business Roundtable, as well as through personal relationships with community leaders. We believe that expanding this to include a formalized Key Communicators' Network would provide additional opportunities for two-way communication with influential community and staff leaders that could be very beneficial to the district.

The individuals invited to participate should be credible members of target audiences identified by the district; people that others go to for "the real story." The group should be a manageable size (or divided into groups to be met with separately) to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building. The superintendent and other district leaders should meet with these opinion leaders once or twice a year.

HCPS currently communicates with established contacts in the community by sending them publications and e-newsletters. This list can be a starting point for identifying and expanding the key communicator list. Along with copies of district publications, key communicators should also receive Board agendas and other important information about the district and schools. In addition, we encourage the Public Information Office to create a special opinion leader e-News Update for breaking news or critical communications that would ensure these key communicators have accurate facts and key messages regarding an issue or situation.

What makes this type of group effective is that it is comprised of people who are respected and influential members of a specific group of stakeholders. They are perceived as having access to "inside" information and they are considered to be a believable and credible source of accurate information. This group also can be used as a sounding board to test new ideas or provide insight on legislative agendas; a conduit to deliver key messages to stakeholders; and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns. These key communicators should also be given a "hot line" number (usually the Public Information Office) to call if they need information or hear of an erroneous statement or rumor that needs correcting.

NSPRA offers a step-by-step *Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Key Communicator Programs* should the district need additional information on getting a key communicator network started.

- **Maximize the use of ALERTNOW technology for communication.** HCPS has recently implemented an ALERTNOW voice-messaging system in the schools. Focus group participants clearly like and appreciate this communication tool and, if used appropriately, it has tremendous potential to deliver critical information in a timely manner. These types of communication systems have community applications as well, as

evidenced by school systems impacted by Hurricane Katrina and most recently by Poway Unified School District in San Diego during the catastrophic fires in that area. We recommend conducting regular evaluations of how ALERTNOW is being used to determine message penetration and also to ensure that it is not overused so that parents begin deleting calls before information can be delivered. It is also a good idea to conduct refresher training annually for principals in crafting effective voice messages along with reviewing guidelines for judicious use of the system. In addition to communicating with parents, the system can be used to distribute important information or updates to all staff quickly.

- **Close the information loop on all projects and issues.** While the Board and administration always strive to make good decisions on behalf of students, there is a risk of being perceived negatively if information or background used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with the staff and community. Explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale for specific actions and projects and then reporting back to them with the results of these efforts will help to close the information loop and build trust in leadership. Ensuring that the rationale for decisions is presented, along with the outcome, is a critical role for the Public Information Office.

  This also extends to any district committees and task forces. They should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that committee members don't think their time has been wasted or their input wasn't valued. Communication follow-through is critical if HCPS truly wants to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way.

  HCPS should continue its efforts to create a communication environment based on openness, honesty and trust, and all communication and marketing efforts should support and promote this goal. The overall priority for communication should be to build and enhance relationships with all stakeholders.

- **Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.** Part of the transition from information delivery to strategic communication and engagement is decreasing the school system's reliance on local news media to tell its story. Most school districts have a love/hate relationship with the news media. Education receives a great deal of positive coverage from most media organizations, yet the perception of many educators is that only bad news is reported, reporters distort the truth, or the media is "anti-education." Education leaders need to understand the media's role in society, the reporter's job, and the requirements and deadlines of different media organizations. Media representatives and reporters need to understand the pressures, requirements and mandates of educators, and develop an appreciation for the challenges educators face in today's school setting.

  HCPS' Public Information Office strives to be responsive to media needs and to build working relationships with reporters and editors. However, these efforts have had limited results with the local newspaper, *The Aegis*. Focus group participants consistently described *The Aegis* as being negative in its approach to covering HCPS, with the

exception of sports. The *Harford Schools* newspaper has served as a counterpoint to *The Aegis,* and has provided a venue for the district to share positive news about the schools.

Technology has dramatically changed how people access news and information. A distinct advantage this offers school districts is the ability to "push" information directly to stakeholders, without having to rely on the news media or the U.S. Mail. Misinformation and inaccurate facts can be immediately corrected with web site postings and e-mail alerts.

An effective communication program counteracts media "gatekeepers" by developing and maintaining a transparent two-way communications program designed to reach stakeholders directly in a myriad of ways. By building strong relationships with key stakeholders, HCPS will be more successful in delivering its message and communicating in "one clear voice."

Recommendation 4: Identify and frame issues to ensure clear, consistent messaging.

A key trait of school systems with strong communication programs is a consistency of message that is evident throughout all levels of operation and in all employee groups. Maintaining a high level of awareness and information-sharing becomes more challenging as a community evolves and issues become more complex. A commitment to and expectation of ongoing, transparent communication with stakeholders must be expressed from top leadership on down.

While core mission and vision statements provide a foundation for communicating clearly and consistently, managing the content and delivery of messages around key issues should be viewed as the framework for the communication plan. Proactive communication involves identifying key issues facing the district; determining what stakeholders need and want to know about issues and education, as well as the best vehicles for delivering information; framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and engaging stakeholders in helping to realize positive outcomes.

Focus group participants across the groups expressed a desire to be kept informed of all the news about HCPS – good and bad. While they appreciate the district's efforts to disseminate positive stories, they also want to know about the issues, challenges and incidents that impact the schools, particularly when it comes to student safety.

They were also highly interested in the rationale and process used by the Board and administration to make important decisions and would like to be kept informed of progress from the start until the final outcome. It is important to foster open communication so that HCPS is perceived as a district that is transparent in sharing successes *and* challenges. Some strategies to assist in creating an open process include:

- **Use communication protocol questions to guide decision-making.** 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 Senior Staff meetings and adapted for administrative, 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, etc.] will be communicated" section to agendas for administrative, principal and advisory committee meetings as well as Board 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.

- **Create a communications advisory committee or ad hoc issues team to help frame messages.** It may also be helpful to create a communications advisory council or special ad hoc issues teams to assist in assessing and framing messages around specific district issues (i.e., block scheduling, uniforms and redistricting) as well as issues that impact the

greater community, such as BRAC and an increasingly diverse population. For example, many focus group participants said that they moved to Harford County for the schools. When planning future finance campaigns, one of the messages about HCPS should stress the tradition of excellence and community support that makes Harford County a desirable place to raise a family.

Issues teams or committees 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. We recommend, however, that the "wordsmithing" of messages be the responsibility of the Public Information Office.

Currently, the HCPS Public Information Office is in the process of developing an internal Professional Learning Community (PLC) to explore the area of communications and public relations for the district. This type of group can assist with improving internal communication and building understanding of the role that all employees have in helping to improve two-way communication across HCPS.

Some school systems have also used these types of teams to monitor and report on the progress of the strategic communication plan and to provide input on revising specific goals and action steps to support the district's strategic plan.

- **Provide talking points and key message reference guides for district leaders and staff.** Board members and administrators should work with the superintendent and the director of Public Information 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 mission and goals 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.

  In addition, whenever HCPS needs to communicate specific information (i.e., special initiatives, crisis responses, program and policy changes), key messages should be developed to share with all staff and key communicators 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 gap, thus co-opting the district's ability to manage its message and communicate effectively.

- **Develop fact sheets on framed issues.** The HCPS web site has a "Hot Topics" button that contains information about current issues under consideration and an option for stakeholders to offer input and comments. This is excellent feature and we suggest

expanding it to include more detailed fact sheets on issues. Besides being posted on the web site, fact sheets can be linked in e-newsletters, shared with all employees, and e-mailed directly to key communicators. Printed copies can be placed in schools, at the central office and made available at local dentist/doctor offices and other businesses with waiting areas. These fact sheets will need to be updated as changes are made, but they could become a "go-to" resource on key issues for all school staff, Board members, community and parent leaders, and other involved individuals.

The following grid is a sample format for communicating about specific issues. The grid becomes a single fact sheet that explains the issue, its current status, and how stakeholders can become actively involved. It is critical to update the fact sheets regularly. They help to ensure that everyone speaks in "one clear voice" about issues impacting the future of the schools.

Issue at a Glance	The Need for School Boundary Planning
Description	Population trends continue to impact class size and capacity levels at HCPS schools.
Work to Date	Explain studies and boundary planning done to date.
Barriers to Progress	List of items such as budget, time, approvals, etc.
What's Next	Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. Next meeting/public forum dates listed, if appropriate.
Your Involvement	You can help our schools with this issue by…
Key Messages/Talking Points	– HCPS is addressing the issue in the following ways… (include specifics) – Relocateable classrooms can provide an interim solution. – Priority consideration is to minimize the impact on students.
For More Information	List contact.

- **Strive for consistency in parent/staff communication and in school procedures.** One of the communication challenges cited by focus group participants is the need to ensure more consistency in communication processes across schools as well as in school procedures related to safety and security. Given the size of HCPS, the district should establish basic standards and protocols that all schools are expected to follow. This reduces confusion for parents who have children at different grade levels and schools and for staff who have responsibilities at multiple campuses.

Recommendation 5: Improve communication with employees.

In order to communicate effectively and credibly in "one clear voice," all employees must clearly understand that communications and public relations is not solely the responsibility of administrators and the Public Information Office. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of the responsibility for this role, from school board members to part-time employees.

The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts. Staff members who are informed and involved take greater pride in their job performance and serve as more effective ambassadors for the schools, making them a key component of an effective communication plan. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to address a problem or concern, it is essential that HCPS leaders incorporate a "staff first" focus into strategic communication efforts. District employees are well-connected to parents and community members and can serve as ambassadors if they are aware of current issues and the rationale behind the decision-making process.

Timeliness and message consistency are critical to developing a strong, effective internal communication program. When employees feel as though they are "the last to know" or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as the news media or parents) they do not feel they are valued members of the district team and it is difficult for them to embrace their important roles as ambassadors for the schools.

Staff focus groups mentioned that information does not always "cascade" effectively through all levels of the school system. This may be the result of busy administrators assuming employees already know the outcomes of decisions or they may be simply forgetting to share information. Whatever the reason, it is important that HCPS leaders "close the information loop" by explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives and then keep them apprised of progress and results. Message consistency is also important in order to ensure HCPS employees are able to speak in "one clear voice" about the district's mission and goals as well as important issues and programs. Some strategies for improving communication with employees include:

- **Refocus the content of *Inside Track* to support the strategic communication effort.** Employee focus group participants indicated that they read, or at least scan, the *Inside Track* employee e-newsletter. However, we believe this publication could be used more effectively to deliver key messages and information that helps staff stay "in the loop" and supports their efforts as ambassadors for HCPS. A first step should be to conduct a reader survey to gather specific feedback on the information employees consider to be a priority and which sections of the newsletter they actually spend time reading. By conducting a comprehensive reader survey, it may be possible to make adjustments that retain the general character of the *Inside Track* while making it more efficient as an internal communication vehicle.

  Information in the *Inside Track* should be directly related to employee issues and concerns rather than repeat what is published in the district's external publications.

However, it is important that all staff receive copies of external publications such as the *Harford Schools* newsletter so that they are aware of what is being communicated to the public.

Information should be included on important district issues and other things that employees need and want to know. Some information that might be included:
- ✓ Explanation of district philosophy and direction;
- ✓ Rationale behind decisions;
- ✓ Progress on strategic plan goals and student achievement;
- ✓ Updates on facilities issues;
- ✓ Updates on policy changes, projects or programs that impact staff;
- ✓ Legislative updates;
- ✓ Answers to the most frequently asked questions by parents and the public; and
- ✓ Communication tips on sharing information with parents and the public.

Information should be presented in a brief, tightly-written format and drive employees to the web site for more extensive or detailed information. This keeps e-publications short and reader-friendly and will build use of the web site as an information source. Live links to newly-released national and state reports or other sites can be included for those interested in more in-depth information on specific topics. Special "Alert" editions can be published as needed (i.e., on time-sensitive topics, crisis situations or incidents of concern such as MRSA). In order for an electronic publication to provide timely information to staff, others in the district (such as the building-level PR Coordinators) would need to assist in this effort by submitting information from their schools and departments to the Public Information Office.

The district should continue to distribute print copies of the *Inside Track* and other e-publications such as *In the Loop* to those employees who do not have regular access to a computer.

- **Increase opportunities for face-to-face communication.** There are many ways to provide information, but changing perceptions and behavior — and building trust and employee morale — requires two-way communication. Research tells us that employees prefer face-to-face communication over any other source, and the focus groups reflected this as well. Principals should be encouraged to include support staff in faculty meetings when appropriate, or find other ways to meet with these employees. While it is not always possible for them to attend faculty meetings due to work hours and responsibilities, making it possible for them to attend some meetings each year will reinforce their sense of being valued as contributing members of the school team. Along with school related topics, principals should also cover important district information at meetings.

  The same is true for the central office staff. The superintendent or a designated administrator should schedule regular meetings with central office staff to update them on activities and issues around the district and provide opportunities for employees to ask questions. Key messages should be shared at all staff meetings (message cards could be

distributed as well), so that everyone is clear and comfortable with their communication role.

The new HCPS administration building has brought all the district's departments together in one site; however, staff focus group participants indicated that in some ways, interdepartmental communication was better prior to the move. A monthly or even quarterly all-staff meeting would help to facilitate a more open dialogue between departments and build a sense of camaraderie in the building. In addition, when departments share responsibilities or are working on joint projects, regular meetings should be held in order to increase "face" time and foster collaboration.

- **Establish protocols for communicating with staff.** Some focus group participants indicated they do not always receive the information they need. Some administrators and school representatives are more conscientious about reporting back and sharing information than others, so there is often a lack of consistency in the amount and quality of information distributed. Another way to build consistency into the communication effort is to establish protocols for how HCPS administrators will communicate with employees. As frontline communicators, employees should receive important information *before* the media and public. When staff members rely on the "grapevine" to get information, it hampers the district's efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. 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 action 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	2/10/08
Key Communicator	Invitation Letter	Send Letters	Sally Brown	2/15/08

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

  All district 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. Evaluating administrators on the effectiveness of their communication efforts can lead to more

consistency in how information is delivered. However, in order for administrators and supervisors 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.

- **Develop a Management Memo for building communications.** Principals indicated they are often overwhelmed with e-mail communications and memos from the various departments at the central office. In addition, staff focus group participants indicated that deadlines they are given for responding to requests are sometimes too tight or impossible to meet. We recommend that HCPS develop a process to consolidate operational communications from central office departments to the schools.

  One technique that has worked for other school systems is a consolidated Management Memo. This is a compilation into a single weekly communication of routine information from all district departments. A top-level administrator or executive assistant should be responsible for compiling and condensing information into topic areas (i.e., testing, facilities maintenance, professional development, etc.). Many districts find that this technique can eliminate dozens of separate memos each week and save many minutes of the principals' valuable time. It also brings to light overlapping deadlines that are problematic for the schools and forces central office departments to plan their work to better accommodate their "customers" – the schools. NSPRA can provide a sample on request.

- **Develop guidelines for managing e-mail/voice mail and provide ongoing training for staff to increase understanding and use of communication technologies.** HCPS has made a substantial investment in technology. However, staff focus group participants indicated a great deal of confusion over where to find information online (SharePoint, InfoWeb, or the system's web site) and frustration over how to manage the volume of e-mail. Ongoing training in how to effectively use available technology resources would not only improve communication efforts but should help employees improve their time management as well.

  The advent of e-mail and voice mail has meant that parents and community members have much greater access to teachers as well as school and district office personnel than ever before. While most of us would agree that this is beneficial, it has also created an expectation of immediate response that can interfere with employee work flow and cause feelings of stress. E-mail and voice mail are essential communication tools in today's world, but it is important for the district to ensure that they remain useful tools and not a time-consuming burden.

  Employee focus group participants indicated that e-mail management is a big issue with HCPS staff and guidelines for its use are needed. We recommend HCPS evaluate current use patterns for e-mail in the schools and central office and involve staff and parent

representatives (as end users) in developing guidelines for keeping e-mail and voice mail communications manageable. These should address such issues as:

- ✓ Reasonable response times for returning calls and e-mails from parents and other district departments (i.e., within 24-48 hours);
- ✓ Expectations for the use of communication tools, such as limiting "all user" messages and non-essential information, limiting the length and number of attachments, etc.;
- ✓ Establishing what constitutes unreasonable demands on a teacher or administrator's time (i.e., daily e-mails or calls from a single individual, or an expectation of immediate response);
- ✓ Establishing appropriate e-mail etiquette;
- ✓ Developing subject line codes that establish priority levels;
- ✓ Other issues that are important to staff and parents.

Once these guidelines are determined, they should be widely distributed to staff and parents. They should also be included in student handbooks and on the web site.

Training staff in the use of communication technology is also an important consideration in order to maximize the district's investment. Even though a great deal of information is available internally on SharePoint and InfoWeb, a majority of employee focus group participants were very unclear about which sites to use and how to find the information they need. Training schedules should be reviewed and revised in order to better serve employee's needs so that HCPS can more effectively use the available technology.

- **Involve staff in decisions that impact them.** When decisions need to be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. For central office administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in school facilities throughout the district, it is particularly important to factor this into decision-making timelines. For example, focus group participants indicated that changes made to purchasing procedures have greatly impacted the work of administrative assistants. Although the online purchasing procedures were supposed to make the process easier, participants said that it has become more time-consuming. Gathering staff input on decisions like this may require extending timelines, but it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance.

  There is great loyalty to the district among HCPS employees, but focus group input indicates there is also a need to build a greater sense of ownership. Creating opportunities for staff to participate in discussions about important issues and decisions, especially those that directly impact their jobs, can help build that sense of ownership as well as responsibility for outcomes.

Recommendation 6: Expand opportunities for parent/community communication and involvement.

No single channel of communication reaches every member of the public. The challenge is making sure interesting and important information is regularly available in convenient formats and ensuring that people know where to find it. According to the focus groups, parents and community members receive their information primarily through district and school publications, the web site and ALERTNOW, *The Aegis,* and personal contacts.

The non-parent population in most school districts today constitutes a majority of the community, and HCPS, while growing, is no exception. So it is vital that the district also develop communication strategies for reaching "empty nesters."

The level of interaction that parents and community members have with the Harford County schools creates many opportunities to communicate the district's mission. However, it is important to create involvement opportunities that are meaningful to people in order to sustain their active participation. It is also important to give people choices that allow them to connect with the schools in ways that best fit their interests and personal schedules. Some people enjoy fundraising, others may prefer committee work, and some may want to work directly with children in the classroom. It is important to recognize that in every community there are people who would like to be involved but don't know what steps to take or who to contact. Additional suggestions for expanding communication with parents and the community include:

- **Review effectiveness of parent/community involvement programs**. We suggest HCPS review current involvement opportunities open to parents and community members to determine which are working well and whether some may need to be revamped or eliminated due to lack of participation. In addition to existing committees and events, some other possibilities to consider include:
    - ✓ Offering workshops for parents on how to help students apply for college and find college scholarships (focus group participants expressed strong interest in this);
    - ✓ Providing refresher courses for parents to help their children with homework;
    - ✓ Organizing a quarterly school orientation session for non-English speaking parents;
    - ✓ Offering parenting skills training (particularly helpful at middle school level);
    - ✓ Organizing a cadre of parents whose children are grown to serve as resource contacts and advisors to parents of young children new to the school system.
    - ✓ Expand tutoring/mentoring programs to involve businesses and community groups.

- **Consider creating an e-newsletter for parents and community.** An option worth serious consideration is the creation of an e-newsletter for parents and community members. HCPS introduced *eSchoolnewsletter* this year, an online publication for individual school use which targets parents, but there is also a need to develop a communication vehicle for the general public that delivers information and key messages in a more timely manner than the *Harford Schools* newspaper.

Stakeholders could sign-up on the district or school web sites as they do for *eSchoolnewsletter*. It should be heavily publicized in district and school print publications and at meetings. An e-newsletter would allow HCPS to deliver important information in a timely manner, and can be designed to balance coverage offered in the *Harford Schools* newspaper (see Recommendation 7). E-newsletters are also cost-effective in that printing and postage costs are eliminated.

- **Provide news inserts for business/community publications.** Most organizations that publish regular newsletters are always seeking interesting information as filler. The Public Information Office could prepare short news updates about the schools and district that businesses and civic groups can use in their employee and member newsletters.

- **Increase awareness of the HCPS speakers' service.** The district provides speakers for various community and civic group programs on request, which is an excellent way to build connections with key communicator groups. HCPS can increase awareness and visibility by formalizing this service and creating a section on the web site outlining topics and speakers (such as administrators and Teachers of the Year). This is an opportune time to expand this service since Dr. Haas is the current Maryland Superintendent of the Year. The district can use the speakers' bureau to maximize her visibility, both locally and statewide. Investigate the feasibility of allowing meeting coordinators to book speakers online as well. A speakers' bureau is an excellent way for the district to take its message to the public and we encourage HCPS to continue and expand this service.

- **Improve communication with senior citizens.** Senior citizens are a growing and important resource for today's schools. Not only can they provide a variety of services as volunteers, tutors and mentors, as voters they also have a great impact on the school system. School districts can benefit by finding ways to serve the growing population of seniors while also providing them with opportunities to work directly with students. Some other ideas to consider include:
    - ➢ Encourage student groups, such as computer clubs and National Honor Society chapters, to teach seniors computing skills at senior or recreation centers.
    - ➢ Make annual presentations at senior centers on what schools are teaching and include students from different grade levels in the presentation.
    - ➢ Include representatives from the senior community in the Key Communicators Network.
    - ➢ Allow senior volunteers to join students for breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria.
    - ➢ Urge schools to send performing groups to senior centers.
    - ➢ Send extra yearbooks and school publications to senior centers.
    - ➢ Contribute school information to senior residence and community center newsletters.
    - ➢ Provide informational materials for doctors' offices in areas of the district with a high number of senior residents.

- **Communicate regularly with existing school alumni groups**. At present, several HCPS high schools have alumni programs, but not all. The district should communicate regularly with these groups about key issues and make sure they are on mailing and e-mail lists to receive HCPS publications as well as those from the school. Alumni are another great source of "ambassadors" and the district may want to encourage all high schools to implement an alumni program. We also suggest that HCPS consider creating a districtwide HCPS Alumni Program to sustain long-term connections with graduates and involve them in activities that build pride and support for the schools. In some school systems, alumni programs are linked to foundations and members are involved in student leadership programs and fundraising to provide scholarships or extracurricular programs. Successful HCPS graduates are a wonderful resource that the school district should reach out to and involve on a regular basis.

- **Expand outreach to business leaders and develop collaborative partnerships with business and civic groups.** The focus group of business leaders had a strong desire to be involved in helping students. They were very supportive of HCPS but felt that it is often difficult for businesses and the district to connect and work together due to a variety of obstacles, including legal and safety issues. The group also noted that the district needs to do a better job reaching out to them. Many businesses don't get involved because they don't know how to help. A concerted effort to improve and facilitate communication and partnerships between business leaders and schools is needed.

  The superintendent meets regularly with the Harford Business Roundtable, and we encourage her to continue this practice. It may also be beneficial to expand outreach to business and civic leaders by establishing a Community Partnership Advisory Council to assist in developing more collaborative projects with businesses and civic groups. This can help to increase involvement and build a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for student achievement and school success.

  Business and civic leaders should be included on mail and e-mail lists to receive district publications and key communicator updates. Another option is to create a special e-newsletter targeted to this group that contains short updates and information about topics of specific interest to them, such as budget and facilities issues, how the district is preparing students for the workforce, achievement test rankings, etc.

- **Initiate regular communication with local clergy.** Faith community leaders are an untapped resource in many school districts. Clergy members have access through their congregations to many non-parent constituents and are generally willing to share information with them, such as what students are learning about diversity and character education and how adults might model these for students. Providing clergy with yearly calendars of school holidays and programs also helps them coordinate religious activities to avoid conflicts in the community. Many congregations have a core of volunteers who can be tapped as tutors and mentors for students as well. Faith community leaders in the focus groups expressed a strong interest in the schools and a desire to work collaboratively with HCPS. We encourage the district to include these leaders in the key

communicator network and to consider inviting them in to meet with district leaders once or twice a year.

- **Implement a "Shadow Day" program.** One of the most effective ways of demonstrating the quality of the educational program is to let people see it in action. "Shadow Day" opportunities allow business and community leaders to spend a couple of hours or a day following a principal, teacher or student. This first-hand experience is especially enlightening for those who have not been in a school for a long time. The goals of this program are to provide a greater understanding of district schools for business and community leaders; expose principals and school staffs to different ideas and perspectives; and begin a dialogue between school leaders and business/community leaders on the needs and responsibilities of the schools.

  Districts that offer this program find it helpful to designate one day annually (i.e., Groundhog Day) for the activity and to hold a debriefing session at the end of the day for participants or invite them to a follow-up breakfast to discuss their observations and ask questions. Some districts videotape participants' comments about the experience for use in marketing the district.

- **Involve students in your communication efforts.** Tying student-learning activities to real world experiences in the community offers a wonderful opportunity to take teaching and learning outside of school walls and shift the traditional dynamic of always inviting the community into the schools. We recommend that the schools seek out new ways to connect to their neighboring communities and promote positive interactions between students and community members.

Recommendation 7: Evaluate and update publications to improve effectiveness and key messaging.

Effective communication requires HCPS to ensure that interesting and important information is regularly available to all stakeholders in a variety of convenient formats, as no single channel of communication reaches every member of the community. This is currently accomplished through a multi-layered strategy that includes print publications, electronic publications, the web site, media outreach, and some video.

While communication technology has made it easier to reach stakeholders, it has also increased the volume of communication from many different entities, making it increasingly difficult to reach target audiences who are overwhelmed with information, both personal and business-related. As a result, information needs to be "pushed" to parents and community members more proactively, delivering "what they want, when they want it," so it is important to think strategically about how key messages will be delivered. In order to move toward this type of information delivery system, it will be important for HCPS to evaluate current communication vehicles in order to change and adjust to better meet stakeholder needs.

It is obvious from its 50-year history that the newspaper was at one time the sole source of first-hand news and information about HCPS. However, today growing numbers of people seek out information from more immediate sources – the Internet, RSS feeds and podcasts, satellite radio, etc. – and are trading traditional print publications for electronic versions that can be accessed at any time in any place. Our assessment of focus group input indicates that this shift is true of HCPS stakeholders as well, and that it is time to consider recreating the *Harford Schools* newspaper to better serve the changing needs and preference of today's readers.

At present, the newspaper is primarily a "brag sheet" of student and school successes and does not address district education issues in depth. Focus group participants noted that while they do read the *Harford Schools* newspaper, it is not widely viewed as a primary source of timely information about the district. To this end, we recommend the following specific steps to redesign and repurpose the publication:

- **Conduct a readership survey or focus groups.** While the auditors were able to gather some feedback on publications, there was not sufficient time to go in-depth with the focus groups. Therefore, we strongly encourage the Public Information Office to conduct readership surveys or focus groups on all publications in order to better evaluate the content needs of stakeholders, as well as the format and method of delivery (see Recommendation 3).

  When asked what information they most desired, both internal and external focus groups indicated they wish to be kept informed about incidents that occur on school campuses and on the rationale behind Board and administrative decisions. Parent and community groups were also interested in information about school funding and finance as well as long-range plans for the schools. The primary focus of any publication, including the *Harford Schools* newspaper, should be to deliver news and information based on what parents and staff members say they want to know.

- **Redesign the newspaper format.** The *Harford Schools* newspaper should be updated and given a fresh look. Factors to consider include page design, layout and size of the publication. Some focus group participants said that the print is too small, dense and difficult to read. A redesign should focus on presenting information in a highly readable format that presents information in a short, concise fashion. The district may want to consider moving away from the newspaper tabloid format to a smaller, newsletter design and expanding the publication's name to *Harford School News.* It's important to remember that the *Harford Schools* newspaper is competing for readers' attention along with numerous other publications. For the major audience of non-parent residents, it's not enough to see names and faces of children; content must be relevant, the writing and terminology engaging, and the layout interesting in order to grab their attention.

- **Balance print and electronic publications for strategic communication.** As a monthly publication, the *Harford Schools* newspaper is a very labor intensive effort given the limited staffing in the Public Information Office. By developing an annual publication content plan and balancing the use of print and electronic publications, HCPS can become more strategic and effective in reaching its stakeholders.

As HCPS' flagship publication, the primary focus of *Harford Schools* should be to deliver important information and key messages about the schools to parents and community members. It should also be used to help strengthen brand identity and market educational programs (see Recommendation 13). As a print publication, in today's era of instant communication it has limited valued in delivering time-sensitive information. However, when planned to work in tandem with an e-newsletter targeted to the community (see Recommendation 6), it has the potential of offering a solid information foundation that addresses multiple-user needs.

Consider this model:

- Scale back the publication of the *Harford Schools* newspaper to quarterly. The first issue of the year should be a "Back to School" edition with pertinent information for parents; volunteer and partnership opportunities for community members; calendars and meeting schedules; vitas and contact information for Board members and senior administration; and other information frequently requested by the public throughout the year. The current *HCPS Annual Report* could become the second issue. Extra copies of this issue can be printed and used as marketing materials throughout the year. The third issue could provide updates on progress toward Strategic Plan goals, the Maryland Bridge to Excellence and NCLB; facilities updates and progress reports; legislative highlights; and reports on district programs and initiatives. The final issue of the year should celebrate student and staff achievements and successes and recognize "ambassadors" and other special efforts to support the schools. Some of the information currently included in the current *HCPS Annual Report* such as the spotlights on the year's inductees into the HCPS Educators Hall of Fame could be included in this end-of-year.

- Develop a new e-newsletter (see Recommendation 6) to deliver time-sensitive news and key messages in a brief, reader-friendly format. Links can be provided to the web site for readers interested in more in-depth information or to access forms, etc. Special editions of the e-newsletter can also be used to address single-topic issues, such as BRAC, and e-Alerts can also be used for special situations. Rather than duplicate information from the *Harford Schools* newspaper or vice versa, the two publications should work in tandem to provide full coverage of the district. The newspaper should help drive readers to the e-newsletter by highlighting its purpose and encouraging them to sign up online.

Although we are recommending the addition of a new e-publication, the nature of electronic communication makes it fast and easy to produce, and by reducing the *Harford Schools* newspaper to a quarterly, the Public Information Office staff will have more time to focus on strategic communication efforts that better support district goals.

- **Develop an annual content plan for publications.** The core content of each issue of the *Harford Schools* newspaper and the e-newsletters 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 the major audience based on research of readers' interests. This could include information about what and how students are learning; comparative test scores; budget accountability and rationale behind decisions; student progress and college attendance rates; impact of changing demographics on the schools; outstanding student and staff performance; and information on how community members can support the schools. One technique for tying important information directly to the strategic plan is to indicate at the top of each article the specific goal it relates to. This helps readers connect teaching and learning to targeted outcomes.

- **Use *The Harford Schools Newspaper* to drive people to the district web site for more information.** The content of each issue could serve to provide an overview of issues and then drive readers to the web site for more specific details, in-depth analysis, and updated information. It should be viewed as one component of the communication process of the district rather and expand beyond its current "good news" focus. Once at the web site, stakeholders could sign-up for e-newsletters for more timely updates.

- **Evaluate the current distribution process for the *Harford Schools* newspaper.** During the focus groups, we heard numerous comments from participants about the need to improve the distribution process of the newspaper. Secondary students are not reliable for "back pack" distribution, and many community residents do not have access to the newspaper at all. HCPS may want to consider mailing the newspaper, particularly the *HCPS Annual Report* issue, to all postal addresses in the County so that it receives the widest distribution possible, including parents and empty nesters. This may be much more feasible as a quarterly publication than it is in its present monthly format. In addition, we recommend that the district print enough extra copies so that each issue can be distributed to staff members. This will help provide them with the information they need to answer questions from the public related to the publication, and keep staff in the information loop.

As mentioned in Recommendation 3, school newsletters are a primary source of information for parents, and one way to maximize their effectiveness as communication vehicles is to include important district news. Other suggestions for school newsletters include:

- **Use school newsletters to reach stakeholders in the community**. In order to push information out to "empty nesters," principals should consider distributing copies of school newsletters to nearby doctor and dentist offices, beauty salons, and businesses such as Jiffy Lube, where people sit and wait for services. Another option is to mail copies of newsletters to homes within a limited mile radius of the school. Any of these strategies would provide taxpayers with a closer connection to the schools and help build stakeholder support at a grassroots level.

- **Develop graphics standards**. From a graphics perspective, school newsletters in HCPS vary greatly in quality. We recommend setting graphic design standards for publications to develop a more consistent look that supports the HCPS "brand" (see Recommendation 13). School newsletter banners should include the name of the district as well as the school, and other standard information (i.e., the principal's name, address and phone,

school motto and mascot, etc.). At present, no consistent standards are followed, and many of the newsletters give no indication of what school district they belong to. In order to build a marketing "brand" for the district, all schools should clearly identify themselves as being a unit of HCPS.

Because school newsletters are a primary source of information for parents, they should be designed with this in mind. This could be approached in two ways: several different templates could be professionally designed for principals to use, or inservice training could be provided for staff members responsible for producing newsletters. This would help to ensure greater readability and consistency across the district.

Some districts create a stylebook that provides schools and departments with information and guidelines on writing style and punctuation, graphic design tips and guidelines, and use of the district logo and positioning statement. This can be a particularly helpful tool in large districts such as HCPS.

Recommendation 8: Continue to develop and expand public engagement/outreach efforts.

HCPS has initiated successful public engagement processes on different topics in recent years such as study circles on minority issues, town hall meetings on the development of the Master Plan, and an Education Leadership Conference that included state and local elected officials as well as parents and staff. In addition, the district has an active PTA Council and a variety of advisory committees and councils to assist district leaders in studying and addressing issues and challenges. However, when asked whether they feel HCPS provides opportunities for stakeholders to have input into decisions in general, many focus group participants expressed doubt as to whether their voices are truly "heard" by district leaders.

This perception appears to be driven in part by a lack of follow-through on the district's part in closing the communication loop by informing stakeholders on the outcomes of actions taken as a result of their input. Focus group participants also indicated that there is a need for the Board to improve its relationship with the community as they are sometimes perceived as being "non-responsive." These perceptions are indicative of the ongoing importance of the communication effort in building trust, confidence and a sense of shared responsibility for the schools among all stakeholders – internal and external. HCPS has been in the vanguard of Maryland school systems using public engagement strategies, and we strongly encourage the district to continue to develop and expand engagement efforts in order to address these concerns and strengthen relationships with the community.

Timing is critical to all successful engagement initiatives. In order to include opportunities for parents and community members to participate in dialogue with the Board and administration on major initiatives or program and policy changes that impact the schools, the district must factor this into decision-making timelines. While it is difficult to put exact start and finish times on any given issue under discussion, one way to begin is by determining the outside deadline for a final decision, and then work backwards from that point. The bottom line for

planning is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process, and not just brought in at the approval stage, after the bulk of development work has been done. It is also important to evaluate what works and what doesn't in order to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future.

The other factor to consider is that not every decision requires an engagement process. One way to assess this is to consider what Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, calls "Gateway Questions" that lead to engagement:

- *Is this a problem that affects me*? – People first have to connect the problem or issue to what they deem valuable before they will get involved (or engage).
- *Can I do anything?* – Even if they feel the problem is serious, they have to feel there is something they personally can do to make a difference.
- *Who will join me?* – People often feel powerless if they see themselves as acting alone, but believe they can make a difference if others of like mind join them.

Consider using a communications advisory committee or issues teams (see Recommendation 4) to help determine which issues, challenges or decisions require an engagement process by using the "Gateway Questions" to assess possible public interest and reaction. Some additional engagement strategies to consider include:

- **Continue to use study circles on "hot topics" impacting the district.** HCPS stakeholders are familiar with this engagement process, so we encourage the district to continue to use it for specific issues needing public input. For example, the district is considering implementing a county-wide school uniform policy. This is certainly an issue that meets the criteria of the Gateway Questions, and will no doubt engage a broad spectrum of parents.

- **Continue the use of advisory committees to study issues and concerns.** HCPS has a variety of advisory committees that serve the district. We encourage you to continue these committees as they offer opportunities for interested stakeholders to become more involved with the district. However, it is also important to evaluate their effectiveness on a regular basis in order to ensure that the work they are charged with is meaningful and directly supports the Board's goals.

- **Connect early with new families.** With the influx of new families to the community, HCPS is also acquiring a large force of potentially enthusiastic and loyal supporters. It is critical to reach these new families when they first move to the district to welcome them and let them know the schools are committed to working with them to make their children's educational experience a success.

    Some school districts develop a program and team for reaching out to new residents. HCPS could recruit veteran parents and PTA leaders to form a HCPS Parent Ambassadors Club to welcome newcomers to their schools. This can also be a great role for once-active parents whose children are now grown and out of the system, as it provides them with an opportunity to stay involved and mentor young parents. These

"experienced" parents can serve as resource contacts and advisors while providing a peer connection to the schools.

Families should be provided with a packet of materials containing the most frequently asked questions that new residents usually have, as well as other information that explains how they can become involved in their child's school and in the school district.

This type of ambassador group often has a representative or representatives at each school and every effort is made to find a way to meet or talk with the new residents. Contact can be made via phone, or new families can be invited to a special orientation meeting at their school or at the district. This outreach can be particularly valuable for parents of special needs students, to help them access available services. The Parent Ambassadors Club becomes the "Welcome Wagon" for the schools and helps put a friendly face on HCPS by engaging newcomers and ensuring that their first experiences in the district are positive.

- **Engage parents in their children's education.** Many districts have developed "Parent University" programs to provide support to parents beyond the local school's parent outreach programs. These include workshops on parenting, preparing for college, learning about the district's curriculum and how to help with homework, and other topics that engage parents in their children's education by providing them with the tools they need to become involved. Make information about how to get involved easy to access by publishing it in district and school publications and on the web site. Research shows that one of the "gaps" in communication with parents is that schools too often forget to issue "invitations" for them to become involved. Make this a regular component of school communication with parents.

- **Keep a balanced approach to Board decision-making.** Focus group feedback indicated that the Board is sometimes perceived as not being open to ideas or input different from their own. The Board may want to review its decision-making process to address this concern. We have found in some instances that this perception exists because of restrictions placed on the Board by Open Meeting laws and the public's lack of understanding of meeting protocols. One way to address this is for the Board President to explain the protocol at the start of each meeting, so that those in attendance clearly understand that the Board may only respond to topics and concerns that are on the agenda.

  We also encourage the Board to build time for listening and dialogue with stakeholders into the beginning stages of decision-making, and not just at the end prior to taking a vote. The Board will never be able to please everyone, but the decision-making process needs to be balanced and should solicit community input through public engagement strategies that provide insight on how the community feels about key upcoming issues.

- **Hold "Coffee Conversations" in the community.** Focus group participants noted that the Board president has been attending PTA meetings to share information and answer questions and that other Board members have also started to go out to schools more as

part of a new effort. This is seen as a positive step and we encourage the Board to continue this type of outreach.

Another strategy that has worked well in some school systems is to offer a monthly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversation with Board members or administrators about the school system. Consider teaming up with a local coffee shop or restaurant to host the event. Set a regular time and day (i.e., every second Tuesday from 7:00 – 9:00 a.m.). Board and Senior Staff members could pair up and rotate attendance. Taking the school district to the public this way can often be an effective way to encourage engagement as it is less intimidating than asking the public to come interact on district "turf."

To be most effective, provide a structure for the conversations by designating topics – for example, one date might focus on a specific goal of the Master Plan, another on the budget or growth issues, etc. Open-ended "venting" sessions are not particularly useful, and it also is important to honor the district's chain-of-command for solving individual problems related to the schools or personnel. The key is to meet with community members on their turf 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 opinion research and information. The nature of the HCPS community would likely lend itself well to such informal opportunities for conversation.

A variation of this strategy is to engage staff members in monthly "Lunch and Learn" sessions with the superintendent and/or Senior Staff members. These meetings could be rotated among feeder areas and should include support staff as well as teachers.

- **Consider adding a "Board Listening Session" to one meeting a month.** While the public comment section of the regular meeting agenda allows the public to speak to specific action items, Board meetings offer limited options for the public to give more general input. A strategy being used by some boards is to add a "listening session" – a half-hour or hour-long – before the start of a study session or regular meeting. The purpose of this session is to allow the Board to hear directly from the public on issues or concerns that may not be on the agenda. These sessions should be structured more like a study session to allow Board members to ask questions and respond as appropriate. The district will need to check with legal counsel to make sure that open meeting law guidelines are followed, but this may be an option worth investigating.

- **Look for new opportunities to use available GIFT technology.** HCPS has used the Group Interactive Feedback Technology (GIFT) to gather feedback from stakeholders in the past. The interactive keypads enable leaders to "take the pulse" of a live audience by polling them in various ways. We understand that the district has not used this equipment lately, and we suggest looking for appropriate opportunities where it might be used periodically. Principals might also find this technology useful and could be trained in its use.

- **Encourage district leaders to become active in local civic and service organizations.** Community and business leaders are regularly asked to become involved in education and the schools. It is equally important for school leaders to play an active role in the community and demonstrate their commitment to those who support the schools on a regular basis. This also provides ongoing opportunities to share information about the district with influential leaders. The Board, administration and staff should be encouraged to get involved in various boards and commissions, either at the city level or with local businesses in the community.

What is critical to the success of any public engagement strategy is the Board and administration's commitment to engaging the public in dialogue, listening to input and recommendations, and taking action based on all the information gathered. While this does not mean everything discussed will be implemented, it does mean that such input will be considered in the context of how it furthers the district's mission and goals.

Recommendation 9: Update and revise the crisis communication plan and improve communication about school incidents.

Although HCPS has a Critical Incident Plan, our review indicates it is time to revise and update the plan to reflect the level of crisis management needed by school systems in today's world. Focus group participants across the groups, both internal and external, were concerned about inconsistencies in crisis communication response protocols and procedures in the district.

We suggest HCPS review safety protocols and response procedures at each school and work to create greater alignment districtwide. In a system as large as HCPS, varying procedures between schools could be a challenge for emergency responders as well as parents who are trying to keep separate sets of procedures straight for multiple campuses.

Parents expect to be kept informed of any incident or situation that has the potential to touch their child. One of the ways to build trust and make communication more transparent is to ensure staff and parents are informed immediately when a critical incident occurs at a school. HCPS parents in the focus groups were in agreement that they want to be informed about problem situations and crises – large and small – at their child's school as well as at other campuses in the district.

Whether it is a fight, a health scare (such as the recent MRSA concern) or other situation that requires the district to take action, staff and parents in the impacted school should be notified as soon as possible as to the nature of the incident and the steps being taken to address it. In order to ensure that staff members are able to speak in "one clear voice," all HCPS administrators and frontline office staff (both central office and neighboring/feeder schools in particular) should be informed and provided with consistent information and key messages so that they can respond to calls from parents and the public.

In this age of instant message technology – that includes students with personal cell phones – information can travel swiftly not only across the district but outside of it as well,

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increasing the likelihood for misinformation to spread. As a result, past protocols of sharing information on an as-needed basis with only those school sites and constituents immediately affected do not work to the district's advantage when a proactive response is needed.

If the incident is one that may be covered by the media, information should be shared with all staff, PTO leaders and key communicators in a timely manner. Participants in the internal focus groups felt it is especially important for the district to communicate with staff before they read about incidents in the newspaper or see it on television.

In order to facilitate timely messaging, the Public Information Office could prepare a series of letter templates and voice message scripts that address a variety of school crisis situations (i.e., bomb scare, fights, weapons on campus, lice outbreak, etc.). These could be provided to the principals on a CD or posted in SharePoint for access as needed. The HCPS *Critical Incident Plan* includes communication actions in the Situation Responsibilities checklist, but the plan does not clearly indicate when to send letters or e-mail/voice-mail alerts to parents or when to communicate between campuses about crisis incidents. Clarifying timelines and messaging specifics, such as who is responsible for leading the response, would improve crisis communication and ensure that communication responsibilities are clear.

Communication should be a major component of the overall plan. Poor communication with staff, parents, news media and the community in a crisis situation can do more damage to the district's reputation than the crisis itself. A crisis manual should clearly delineate communication responsibilities at the district and building level. The organizational structure may vary depending on the type of crisis, but staff members should be designated to be in charge of various communication responsibilities. These should include:
- Leadership advisement;
- Internal communication;
- External communication;
- News media;
- Communication command center;
- Telephone bank;
- Research and media monitoring;
- Counseling and support;
- Donations and volunteers; and
- Special events (i.e., memorial services).

The existing Critical Incident Plan focuses primarily on immediate response steps. It is critical that a crisis manual also include proactive crisis management planning along with a consistent, well-coordinated plan for disseminating information about an incident and providing support in the aftermath. The manner in which a district manages and communicates about a crisis can create a long-lasting impression, either negative or positive.

Given the heightened awareness about safety following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School as well as more recent attacks on schools (i.e., Virginia Tech), and severe natural disasters such as tornados, hurricanes and fires around the country, we believe it is particularly important for

HCPS to have a clearly delineated plan in place. The plan also needs to outline specific procedures for Shelter in Place in case of a chemical incident or attack, or an event such as the sniper shootings that occurred in the D.C. region. The Public Information Office should be closely involved in coordinating crisis management and communication. We also strongly recommend that the district invite representatives from local emergency response agencies (police, fire, hospital, military, behavioral health services) in the County to help develop and review the crisis response and communication plan.

Another important component of a good crisis plan is staff training. All employees need to receive regular inservice in the completed plan and procedures. It is critical for staff members to know and understand their role and responsibilities in a crisis to ensure the safety of all students as well as that of their colleagues.

NSPRA's *Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual* (the third edition, updated and revised, will be published this summer) could be a model for HCPS to either adopt (it is available on disk so that it can be tailored to individual district needs), or from which to extract important communication principles in crisis situations.

Recommendation 10: Emphasize the role of employees and retirees as Ambassadors for Education.

Perceptions about any organization are driven by the personal interactions and experiences that the public has with its employees. Perceptions about customer service in particular can make or break an organization's reputation, even one with an outstanding communication program. Most employees desire to be good representatives of their schools, but it is incumbent upon district leaders to provide them with the tools and skills to help them be successful in this role.

One excellent way to create employee "ambassadors" is to include a communications component as part of the orientation program for new staff. This provides an opportunity to stress the importance of relating accurate information and facts to the public as well as an opportunity to do some "myth busting" of employee and community perceptions of the district.

HCPS' orientation program should acquaint new employees (support staff as well as teachers) with district culture and procedures and strive to help them feel part of the team. Provide new employees with an orientation packet that includes general information about the district; an overview of the history of the school system; the mission, vision and goals; a list of all district publications, their purpose and when they are published; an employee handbook; any required forms; where to go for accurate information when they hear a rumor; and tips on being a positive "ambassador" for the schools. It is important to include support staff because they are also key communicators who are viewed as credible sources of information by the community. We suggest the district's existing staff orientation program be reviewed and revised to include a communication component.

Continuing employees should also receive training in "ambassadorship" as part of introducing a renewed focus on effective communication. Provide them with an "HCPS Education Ambassador" tool kit of district information that they can use in their daily interactions with the public and conduct refresher sessions each year. HCPS leaders should continue to stress the role of all employees as communicators and ambassadors for education, and support them in this effort by providing timely information; clear, consistent messages; and continued training.

Another terrific source of "ambassadors" is the local group of retired HCPS employees. We understand that this group is some 600 members strong, and we believe tremendous potential exists to recruit these former employees to help communicate the good news about HCPS schools. The focus group of retired district administrators that we met with was very active in the community and supportive of the district. They indicated that there are many retirees who would be interested in taking a more active role in the schools. We suggest that HCPS convene a group of retirees to determine what types of "ambassador" activities they would be most interested in participating in and solicit their help in developing a program and recruiting other retired employees.

Reinforce employees' and retirees' efforts by highlighting good ambassadorship in the *Harford Schools* newspaper and *Inside Track* as well as in school newsletters. In addition, consider recognizing an "Ambassador of the Month" at Board meetings.

Recommendation 11: Conduct communication training for staff.

One of the communication challenges noted by focus groups is the need for more consistency in communication and standardization of some procedures, particularly in the area of crisis communication. This can be partially addressed by providing inservice training designed to help staff members as well as administrators become effective communicators and ambassadors for the district. A majority of the principals expressed interest on the *Communications Checklist* survey in having some inservice training in communication provided for their staff members.

The Public Information Office currently provides some communications training in media relations to administrative and supervisory staff. This occurs during the "Rookie Rally" program for new administrative and supervisory employees and also during school opening meetings for principals and assistant principals. They also offer customer service training to school staff.

We understand that inservice training time is limited to the time available on agendas. However, one component of a strategic communication plan is ensuring that staff members have the skills necessary to communicate effectively, so we strongly encourage HCPS to give serious consideration to this need. We recommend that communication training be expanded to include all staff groups and that some training be mandatory. Some communication inservice opportunities to be considered include:

- **Mandatory media training** – We recommend that administrators receive annual training in media relations to develop and update their skills in delivering an effective message in an interview or during a crisis. This will help them feel more comfortable when they find themselves in a spokesperson role and ensure key messages are delivered effectively. One of the lessons we've learned from member districts that have been impacted by large-scale crises (i.e., Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the recent San Diego fires) is that the public information office alone cannot manage the communication effort without assistance from the entire administrative team. When team members are trained and comfortable in their roles, crisis communication is more proactive, smooth and effective, which contributes to faster response and resolution.

- **Developing school and classroom communication/PR plans** – We recommend that a component of the district's strategic communication plan include the development of school communication plans that tie directly to it. These can be fairly simple and straightforward and should be designed to deliver key messages and measure the success of building-level communications. Individual classroom plans can also be developed that support the schools' and district's communication goals. NSPRA's *Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy* guidebook and CD-ROM provides practical tools and tips for teachers that may be of use in HCPS.

- **Newsletter design and content** – Research indicates that school newsletters are an important source of information for parents, and focus group participants confirmed this in HCPS. Training in basic layout techniques, effective use of type fonts, graphics and color for staff members responsible for producing the newsletters – print and electronic – would insure greater readability and consistency across the district and help the schools make their publications a "must read" for all parents. Currently, school newsletters across HCPS vary widely, and many school newsletters lack basic information, such as the school system name and web site address. Consistent standards and training are needed in this area.

- **Parent-Teacher Conferences/Open Houses** – Parent-teacher conferences and open houses are more often than not critical first impression opportunities for good "ambassadorship." Training teachers in how to conduct an effective conference and prepare an open house presentation can have a major impact on parents' perception of the quality of the school.

- **School PR Coordinator training** – Currently, HCPS has "PR Coordinators" identified at each school who serve as media liaisons for the Public Information Office. This is an excellent strategy for increasing communication support at the building-level, but it is only as effective as the liaisons themselves. Therefore, in order to maximize this communication support effort, the PR Coordinators should receive training at the beginning of each year. Ongoing training and support throughout the year would also help strengthen and expand the effectiveness of this program.

- **Standards of service** – The Public Information Office currently offers training in customer service techniques, which we encourage the district to continue. In addition, a

key component of a good customer service/ambassador program is to involve staff in creating standards of service. Greater employee buy-in for improving customer service can be secured by involving staff directly in establishing standards of service for the district and schools. Standards of service provide clear guidelines to follow and also provide a way to evaluate the effectiveness of district efforts in this area. By providing staff with training, the district will give them tools to support their roles as ambassadors and customer service agents for the schools.

Recognizing that it is difficult to pull staff away for lengthy inservice sessions, the district may want to consider breaking customer service training into smaller time units. NSPRA's *Unlocking Sensational Service* CD-ROM offers a variety of options – from meeting starters to hour- or day-long workshops – for delivering this type of training.

Recommendation 12: Continue to improve the effectiveness and usability of the district and school web sites.

The use of the Internet for providing both interactive and basic information has dramatically changed how school districts communicate with key audiences and market themselves to the general public. District web sites are now critical communication and marketing tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of the district and schools.

Today's connected parents and taxpayers expect to be able to access school information via the Internet, communicate quickly via e-mail and receive important information in a timely manner. The district is using electronic and voice-messaging technology to communicate with employees, students and parents; however, in order to meet stakeholders' 21st Century communication expectations, HCPS must also deliver effective web sites, for individual schools as well as the district.

While not all stakeholders can be communicated with electronically, their lack of access should not inhibit the district's use of technology to communicate. The web site will never eliminate other communication channels because there will always be some in the community who will not have access or who prefer other forms of communication. However, its focus as a communication channel will continue to grow each year.

The HCPS InfoWeb intranet appears to be used by staff, but focus group participants consistently expressed frustration in understanding the differences between InfoWeb (the district's intranet), SharePoint, and the district's external website. Additional training should be provided to close this gap in understanding. Staff and Board members also commented that the constant prompting to provide passwords into protected areas on the internal sites is time-consuming and makes navigating the internal pages more difficult. We recommend the district consider doing some additional research with staff, via surveys or focus groups, to determine how best to facilitate improving access and usability to these various technology resources available to HCPS staff. The rest of this recommendation will deal with the HCPS public web site.

The current HCPS public web site is attractive and contains a great deal of information. Parents can find forms and documents, lunch menus, school information, and many reports and other data. The interactive school locator is helpful for both parents and Realtors. Stakeholders can access a variety of pages designed to meet their needs, with specific resources for students, staff, and the community. The search function is useful in finding information.

- **Add a "How to use this web site" section on the home page.** This suggestion is related to difficulties focus group participants expressed in navigating the site. Today's web site users want information available in no more than two clicks, preferably one, when they go to a web site. Information needs to be clearly marked and intuitive for the site visitor to locate. Given the amount of information on the site, providing tips for how to find specific content areas could be a helpful tool for site visitors.

- **Use the web site to deliver key messages.** Information placed on the web site should be considered in the context of how it delivers key messages. One suggestion is to create a "This Week in HCPS" button on the district home page that would contain short information items and key messages that change weekly and allow for a variety of timely topics to be addressed.

  Web site visitors should be asked to suggest the types of information they find most useful by responding to an online survey or by e-mailing responses. Feedback links that let users offer comments are already available on the HCPS "Hot Topics" area. This is an excellent practice and can be replicated on most key pages. Comments collected from these links can offer valuable insights into the information needs of users – and how well the current site is meeting them.

- **Add a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) section to the home page.** This would serve as a useful resource for the public and staff by providing answers to information most often sought by stakeholders. One way to begin is to ask district office and school administrative assistants to track questions they are most often asked by callers. These can then be compiled for the web site. The HCPS web site should also be used for "myth busting" and to counter the rumor mill. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, or leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community, accurate, factual information should be posted in this section or in another prominent spot on the web page for easy access. One district we know of titles this section on their web site "Just the Facts: Dispelling Myths and Rumors" (visit www.ccusd93.org). School newsletters and other publications should promote the web site as a source of information when people have questions.

- **Redesign the "Hot Topics" area of the site**. The "Hot Topics" area on the HCPS site provides links to information and provides a way for stakeholders to provide feedback, but the information is presented in formal language and document formats that may not be readily understood by the range of stakeholders who may visit the site. Consider presenting the information in a more web-friendly format with descriptions of the documents available. In addition, the "Hot Topics" area should be updated regularly to

ensure that the information is fresh. Issues that are important but no longer "hot" could be moved to a "Frequently Asked Questions" area or other related page.

- **Incorporate use of the web site into the crisis communication plan.** Web sites are also critical information conduits during crises, and it is helpful to keep this in mind when planning content for the site. Crisis information pages can be developed in advance, containing basic response information (i.e., student pick-up, media briefings, basic district/school facts used in news stories, such as enrollment, grade levels, number of employees, etc.). This information can then be activated or posted on the web site when necessary.

- **Develop standards and expectations for the use of Edline.** Secondary parents and students in the focus groups noted inconsistencies between schools and among teaching staff in the use of Edline and in updating student information. Although Edline was praised as an excellent communication tool, focus group participants said it is frustrating when information is available from some teachers and not from others. They also noted that some high schools provide more resources on Edline than others, depending on what each school's staff determines should be posted. Developing consistent standards for posting certain types of information, such as college resources, and for updating teacher content, would improve the use of Edline at the secondary schools. HCPS has made a substantial investment in this technology, so standards and reasonable expectations should be established for its use. It is clear that many teachers are doing a great job communicating with parents; clear expectations demonstrate accountability and a commitment to improving home-school communication.

- **Increase support for school web sites.** As parents increasingly rely on the convenience of Internet access for information about their child's school and academic performance, it is important that school web sites provide current information on programs and activities and offer opportunities for parents to supplement the program at home. Families today also use web sites to "shop" for schools, so it is important that the sites reflect each school's unique identity and special qualities.

  HCPS' use of uniform opening pages for the elementary and secondary school sites is an excellent practice. In addition, the links to the standard School Profiles and the *Maryland State Department of Education Performance Reports* provide consistent information about all the district's schools. Use of the Edline web site format for the middle and high schools provides additional consistency for these secondary school sites.

  Many individual elementary school web sites are in need of attention. Guidelines should be set requiring standard information to be included on individual elementary school sites, as well as some requirements for updates. In addition, the schools should be provided with training and technical support that enables them to keep basic information up to date. Decisions related to the posting of individual teacher web pages should also be considered, such as the development of pages within the HCPS site rather than through sites such as "Teacher Web." By housing the pages with the HCPS site, the system ensures that local oversight occurs, and pages that are no longer current can be removed.

- **Provide additional support to schools in the use of the *eSchoolnewsletter* resource**. Both staff and parents in the focus groups were unclear about how to use the *eSchoolnewsletter* for school communication. Bringing staff together for training and dialogue related to the use of this relatively new communication tool for HCPS would provide an opportunity to build understanding, demonstrate its usefulness and encourage more schools to take advantage of the technology.

HCPS should continually evaluate the effectiveness of the web site as a key component of the overall communication effort and strive to increase interactive components and keep it dynamic and interesting so that users return regularly. For additional ideas, examples of award-winning school district web sites are available at www.nspra.org/members/main_links.htm.

Recommendation 13: Develop a comprehensive branding/marketing strategy.

Focus group participants consistently praised HCPS' high standards, its innovative and cutting edge approach to improving education, the quality schools and staff, and the excellent return on taxpayer's investment. These are all strengths that should be capitalized on in communication.

We recommend that HCPS begin more aggressively "branding" and marketing itself and its schools. The district has an excellent reputation and continues to attract families to the community. A branding/marketing effort should focus not only on promoting a positive image and attracting new families and staff, but also on retaining families who are contemplating enrollment in alternative education programs or the option of home schooling.

Long considered the "Holy Grail" of marketing in the private sector, "branding" is a relatively new concept for public education. More than a name, logo or tagline, strong brands are known for something unique – a promise of value that no other product or organization can claim in quite the same way with as much credibility. The goal of branding is to develop customer loyalty. In developing this marketing effort, HCPS needs to carefully consider how to most effectively expand current communication efforts to include this approach.

Marketing efforts should be supported by research and focus on developing key messages, messengers and delivery methods for each target audience. For example, one target audience might be families who are moving to HCPS as a result of BRAC. Before you can market effectively to this group, you first need to research and understand where these families are currently located and what types of educational environments they currently have available to them. The following suggestions can help refine branding and marketing efforts:

- **Focus on clear, consistent messages.** As explained in Recommendation 4, the key to effective marketing is the development of key messages delivered in "one clear voice." HCPS uses a variety of communication channels (web site, print and electronic publications, voice-messaging, video, public forums, advisory councils) to reach stakeholders. HCPS needs to more clearly define its brand and stay consistently on

message across all internal and external communication vehicles in order to maximize their effectiveness.

HCPS may want to develop an overall theme or motto each year to weave throughout all communications and activities. This could serve as a rallying point for staff, students and community members. One example of a theme that ties directly to the district's vision is "Educating Everyone Takes Everyone." It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public, so we recommend involving staff in creating the theme and developing activities to support it throughout the year. Focusing communications around a central theme that reflects the district's mission will help develop a message about education in HCPS that can be delivered consistently in "one clear voice" by all staff. This can also provide a focus for staff in their role as ambassadors of the district.

- **Consider updating the district logo.** As HCPS begins to focus on its key messages and revitalize its image, we recommend serious consideration be given to updating the district logo. Overwhelmingly, the focus group participants agreed that although it is valued for its historic quality, the logo does not reflect education in the 21st Century. Many focus group participants noted that the ruler and book circular design implies a "no books" message.

  A new graphic look can often serve to announce a new era, garner attention and reenergize communications. A positioning statement or slogan should be incorporated into the logo design as well. Both the design and the positioning statement should clearly indicate that HCPS is about children and education. In our review of materials, we found several different positioning statements in use. "Every Kid Counts" along with a graphic of children is used on some materials, but not on others. The HCPS logo includes the phrase "Serving Youth." The HCPS vision includes the phrase "Educating Everyone Takes Everyone." A carefully developed positioning statement would clarify one, overarching message that represents HCPS, both for the present and future.

  It is helpful to implement standards for incorporating the district logo and positioning statement on all publications (district and school). This can help to ensure that nothing is produced without consistent branding messages and graphic elements in place. For example, not all school newsletters clearly branded the school as belonging to HCPS. All newsletter banners should display the district logo and clearly indicate the school's district relationship.

  Some districts create a stylebook that provides schools and departments with information and guidelines on the use of the logo and positioning statement, graphic design tips, and writing style and punctuation. It is also important to extend this graphic brand image to the web site, again making sure that there are common elements that help the reader make the connection to HCPS. *Note:* We strongly recommend against holding a contest to design a new logo. The logo is an important component of the identity you are trying to build in the community and should be the result of a thoughtful process and skilled graphic artist.

- **Develop guidelines for marketing materials.** The goal of marketing materials is enticement: getting parents, potential employees, business leaders, Realtors and other key audiences to find out more about HCPS. The goal isn't to tell stakeholders everything they possibly need to know so they don't have to – or won't – call for more information. Less is more when it comes to packaging a school or district, and communicating a clear call to action to the people who matter most.

  Branding is more than producing sharp collateral materials, a powerful web site or purchasing paid media (advertising), however. Like Nike, FedEx, Tiffany and Company, Starbucks and Google, great brands are sustainable over time and make an emotional connection with a targeted group or groups. Simplicity is vital: brands should try to own one thought or position in the mind of the consumer. Education may be complex, but communicating about education doesn't have to be.

  The real key to selling an "invisible" product like public education, however, is creating the right experiences – each and every time a stakeholder comes in contact with the schools and its people. Marketing guidelines help districts keep a consistent look, feel, tone and manner; the right experiences convey the district's values, attitudes and beliefs.

- **Define and assess the customer service experience in HCPS.** Effective marketing is based on solid programs that meet customer expectations. What is the customer service experience for HCPS parents and patrons? The level of quality customer service in each office and department should be assessed. For example, do calls bounce from department to department or does every staff member "own" the caller's question or problem, even if it doesn't fall under his or her area of responsibility? Is voice mail used to shield staff from the public? Are all calls or e-mails answered within a reasonable time frame? How are queries tracked, and by whom? How do you know when balls have been dropped or if consistent answers are being given to the same questions, especially if different departments are called? How long does it take from an initial request for an information packet to fulfillment?

  It can also be helpful to evaluate 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 the 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.

  And, since "What gets measured gets done," we recommend that customer service and communication measures become part of job evaluations for managers, supervisors and administrators.

- **Evaluate marketing needs and identify target audiences.** At this time, HCPS has not developed a defined marketing program or goals. In order to use limited marketing dollars wisely, HCPS needs to determine:
  - What you are marketing (what messages you want to send);
  - Who the target audiences are;
  - How you can most effectively deliver the messages (what communication vehicles will be used);
  - When the best time is to deliver the messages; and
  - What results you expect from the marketing effort.

  Once needs, goals and audiences have been determined, marketing materials should be evaluated. Some of the existing information materials developed by the Public Information Office and other departments can be used for a variety of purposes and target audiences. We recommend that materials be assessed using the following steps:
  - Assemble copies of all informational and marketing materials produced for use district wide. These should be evaluated in terms of common elements such as graphic layout, font styles, use of color and photos, and logo placement with a goal of creating a portfolio of publications that, when laid side by side, are easily identified as HCPS information materials.
  - Evaluate awareness levels and gather feedback on the effectiveness of materials via surveys and/or focus groups.
  - Based on feedback, revise content as needed and redesign/repackage materials graphically so they are appealing and offer a consistent and easily recognizable image or "brand look." Eliminate materials that have outlived their effectiveness or purpose. Consider offering some materials in new formats, such as on CD/DVD or streaming video on the web site.

- **Create targeted audience information packets/CDs.** Currently, HCPS provides limited information to targeted groups. For example, the *HCPS Annual Report* is sent to relocating families and School Profiles are sent to the Realtors' Association. Business leaders aren't targeted specifically, but they receive the *HCPS Annual Report*, and teacher recruits get materials that are designed and developed by the Human Resources department. We recommend that HCPS develop a basic information packet or CD that can be adapted to serve a variety of audiences such as new families and families considering a move to the area, real estate agents, business/community leaders, elected officials, and potential teacher recruits. What will make these most effective is to provide information specific to the target group so people do not need to sift through materials that aren't pertinent to them. In addition, consistent branding across all target audiences will support the district's efforts to effectively market HCPS.

- **Develop marketing videos/DVDs.** Videos currently created for the Harford Cable Network should regularly be evaluated for use as marketing pieces. For example, each episode of the HCPS "Your Public Schools" TV show highlights specific programs. The episode on magnet programs is now available as a promotional DVD, and a College Pathways program that is being released this year will also become part of promotional efforts. The Public Information Office staff is working with the HCPS web team to

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enhance the web site with streaming video. Consideration should be given to how available programs and resources could be further used to develop promotional or informational CDs/DVDs for teacher recruitment, parent orientations, and for delivering key messages to staff and key communicator groups.

- **Offer an information seminar for real estate agents.** Real estate agents play an important role in creating a positive "first impression" and image with prospective homebuyers. A seminar is a way to share information about the district with local agents who are regularly communicating with families considering a move to the area. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year in one of your schools. Provide them with information packets and a checklist of information that is available on the district web site. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. 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.

  These key communicators need to be kept informed on how the district is handling current issues, particularly program or boundary changes, so that they don't give out false impressions or inaccurate information about HCPS. In some districts, real estate broker or agent groups are now funding the cost for a district to host a seminar. HCPS might want to investigate possibilities for partnering with a real estate group to provide information sessions or seminars.

- **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 also recommend that the district develop guidelines for offering school tours to community members, and particularly parents of pre-schoolers. A school tour and visit is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighborhood residents and prospective families to promote the benefits of your schools. Along with developing guidelines, training should be provided to key staff and also student leaders to serve as tour guides.

- **Develop a local *Pride* campaign that highlights HCPS and specifically promotes the "Route 40 Corridor" schools**. Focus group participants consistently noted that all schools in Harford County provide excellent educational opportunities. However, the participants also noted that the reputation of the "Route 40 Corridor" schools is often unjustly negative. One way to address this issue is to develop a pride campaign to highlight school and student success stories. The Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) "Pride Campaign," launched in partnership with Comcast Cable in 2004, could serve as a model for materials and Public Service Announcements (PSAs).

  With MSDE permission, graphic elements could be reproduced to tie the HCPS campaign to the state initiative. For example, HCPS could create specific "Pride Quizzes" and "Pride PSAs" for each Route 40 Corridor school to highlight their accomplishments. The printed materials and videos/PSAs could be shared at PTA or other parent meetings, sent to key communicators throughout the district, and posted on the district and school

web sites. In addition, "Pride Points" and other promotional materials, such as Pride PSAs or videos, could be shared with targeted groups during school tours or in other settings. For more information and examples of the MSDE Pride program, see http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/aboutmsde/pride.

Considerations for Staffing and Implementing Recommendations

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication and marketing needs with the recommendations in this Communication Audit Report and it would be unrealistic to expect the Public Information Office to undertake all of them immediately. This report contains recommendations that cover what we consider to be a strategic communication program and certainly more than can be accomplished in a single year. It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem overwhelming at the start. We suggest that Public Information Office staff focus on the first eight recommendations as a starting point.

HCPS is fortunate to have a veteran director of Public Information who is highly thought of and respected by the local community, as well as a dedicated communications team that does an excellent job managing a broad scope of programs. However, it is also important that consideration be given to the budgetary and personnel resources that will be needed to support their efforts to successfully implement a strategic communication plan that supports student achievement and the district's goals. The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive and district leaders must prioritize by need and importance how communication resources will be expended.

A number of the recommendations in this report involve communication activities that can be managed at the school level by principals and assistant principals. Each school can also create a communication team of staff and parents to assist with newsletters, web sites, 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.

As presented in Recommendation 2, if HCPS is truly committed to taking communication to the next level, it is time to refocus the Public Information Office on strategic, proactive communications designed to actively engage stakeholders in making student achievement the top priority in Harford County. 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. However, it is also important that staffing and budget allocations for communications be reviewed annually to determine needs and ensure continued effectiveness.

Conclusion

HCPS is a quality school system with the same communication challenges all school districts face in today's complex education environment. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and HCPS leaders understand that good communication is key to helping district move forward and maximize its potential as a leading school system in the state.

Making the commitment to improve communication is critical to creating a successful two-way communication process that builds support for education and understanding of the important role public schools play in our democracy. We believe HCPS has all the components necessary to create a model communication program – visionary leadership, talented staff, strong community support, a solid reputation as an educational leader, existing technology resources, and a commitment to planned, strategic communications.

Perceptions of Focus Groups

The following is an overview of perceptions identified by the auditors as a result of the focus group sessions and interviews held during the on-site visit October 29 & 30, 2007. This section is not a verbatim report of responses to the auditors' questions. Rather, it contains comments that appear to identify significant beliefs, concerns and suggestions of participants. *It is important to note that the comments recorded here are perceptions and are not necessarily accurate or factual.* Many of these comments led to recommendations in this Communication Audit Report. Other comments may be helpful to the Board of Education and superintendent in addressing staff and community concerns in other areas.

GROUP: PARENTS

Strengths of the district
■ Edline for parent access to information.
■ Teachers.
■ ALERTNOW phone system.
■ Safety for students.
■ Individual comments included:
- Active PTA and parent support at the school level.
- Schoolsout.com for weather.
- Publicized and televised Board of Education meetings.
- Sports programs on Harford Cable.

Improvements needed
■ Student bus schedules.
■ Individual comments included:
- Bus schedules are too early for kids – especially for Harford Tech.
- Even for those who live close to schools, the bus ride can be long.
- One elementary school has an early and late dismissal and parents don't always know which schedule is being used on a day-to-day basis. "It would be nice to get some information about how that works."

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- Split image – very positive *and* very negative.
- "In my opinion, all the schools are very good and we need to stop the stereotyping of schools."
- "We need to change the image to make sure all the schools are perceived as good."

Logo

■ Needs updating.

Best source of news and information

■ ALERTNOW notifications.
■ Individual comments included:

- Edline.
- Elementary and middle school children/students. High school students no longer bring home the materials that the schools send with them.
- Other mothers – particularly active mothers.
- Not all parents are getting the ALERTNOW notifications because not all principals are using it.
- Teacher e-mail.
- *eSchoolnewsletters*.
- E-mails and phone calls.
- Multiple avenues of content (e-mail, voice-mail, direct-mail letters, and print publications). "We do still have parents without e-mail access, so multiple avenues are best."

Ways district communicates well

■ ALERTNOW.
■ Multiple avenues.
■ Coffees or desserts held by principals to provide opportunities for parents to talk with them.

Effectiveness of publications

■ Current publications are effective, but parents would like issues-oriented communications in more timely formats.
■ Individual comments included:

- The calendar is very important
- *Harford Schools* is a "happy" newspaper, but parents want important and timely information about issues, such as MSA testing, in a different format. "I'd like to see an 8 ½ x 11 piece of paper with the important stuff on it."
- *Harford Schools* could be quarterly.
- Information from PTA meetings would be good to get from the school.
- For the most part, school newsletters provide good information.

Web site

■ The web site is user-friendly and needed information can usually be found.

Communication challenges/Improvements

■ Information about MRSA (staph infection) was sporadic and did not seem to be well communicated.
■ Rumor vs. truth is hard to decipher, so it is better to send information out.
■ Sometimes children get information about what's going on first, but parents want to receive the information first.

Parent/Community involvement
■ Individual comments included the following:
- Parents can volunteer at the elementary level.
- Surveys could be used more.
- There are public meetings for big issues, and parents have been invited to the school board meetings. "We would like more opportunities for coffee and conversation and more meet the teacher opportunities."
- Macro-decisions appear in the paper without the opportunity for parental involvement in the decision-making process.
- Perhaps the Board could rotate their meetings into various schools and various communities and make collaborative activities more convenient. "Lots of parents commute. To go home, and then to come all the way down here is not realistic for many parents."
- Decentralize the opportunities and make involvement more available by going where the parents are. "School-based activities are going on all the time and the parents go there for the football games and things."

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Funding and safety.
■ Overcrowded schools with future growth expected.
■ Individual comments included:
- Convincing tax payers and the County Council to invest more funding in schools. "It is especially important to communicate this to stakeholders without children in schools."
- More creative engagement of the private sector in education. "Children will suffer without appropriate funding for public education."

GROUP: VOLUNTEERS/PARENTS

Strengths of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- Innovative system, willing to take risks – good or bad. Making an effort to listen to parents and be responsive.
- Small graduating class at high school is attractive.
- As an alumnus, one participant purposefully stayed in Edgewood because of the diversity.
- Another's family moved to Harford County for better schools and better opportunities.

Improvements needed
■ Updates for Edline are only required twice a quarter. Parents are frustrated with the lack of consistency, especially if child is struggling.
■ Elementary schools still rely on the "backpack express."
■ Individual school web sites aren't updated, so aren't useful.
■ Communication with parents of special education students. Particularly those with IEPs and those in the Gifted & Talented program.

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- A good district, but there's always room for improvement.
- Most complaints are about communication.
- Redistricting is always a sensitive issue. Board members are accessible, but are perceived as "going thru the motions."
- One participant chose an alternative program because he felt the school was "teaching to the middle."

Logo
■ Don't care about it.
■ "Dusty."

Best source of news and information
■ School principal.
■ Board meetings.
■ *The Aegis* – biggest single source of information or misinformation in County.
- "It's [*The Aegis*] the heart of Harford County. Get more from them than from the schools."

■ Web site.
■ Televised Board meetings.
■ School staff.

Ways district communicates well
■ ALERTNOW is very well received and considered a wise expense.
■ Snow closings – bothers some people with young kids to get calls so early since information is everywhere.
■ *In the Loop*. But it doesn't provide the detail of old *BLine*. *In the Loop* could link to more detailed information.
■ "Communication with Don Morrison and his office is great."
■ "You can never over communicate."

Communication improvements needed
■ Individual comments included:
- Staff don't always get back with responses.
- Parents learn communication protocols when their children are in elementary school. They are told the principal is the final word.
- There are resources available at central office that should be more parent-friendly. Principals should feel repercussion if parents are unhappy.

Information desired
■ Markers for success on the 5-year plan.
■ Alerts on safety and security. Don't want to find out about incidents from the news or *The Aegis*.
■ If district wants to build trust with parents, it needs to communicate effectively and immediately.

- Most parents trust the schools to do the best they can, but they need to communicate about it.
- School reform; uniforms.

Effectiveness of publications
- Most contain information that's old news. Participants said they don't read the *Harford Schools* newspaper to find out something new.

School newsletters
- ALERTNOW is used well by the schools, and is more effective than the high school newsletter. Some participants get monthly PTA newsletters.
- Newsletters suffer from "30 day delay." The story is already out (i.e., MRSA)
- *eSchoolnewsletter* – most didn't know much about this.

Web site
- District site is updated and more useful than school sites.
- School sites could be a critical resource.
- Individual comments included:
    - Should have communicated to high school PTA that they were moving to new Edline template for web site. There was no communication about the transition.
    - User-friendly, convenient to leave a comment.
    - Somewhat helpful. Often looking for more historical info, redistricting or past enrollment information.
    - Board agendas sometimes don't go online until Friday (meetings are on Monday). Exhibits don't always get on until day of meeting. Used to have hard copies available at Board meetings.
    - Hard as a parent group to wait until Friday for agenda posting. Doesn't leave time to get PTA board approval to take a position on agenda items of concern to them.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
- Individual comments included:
    - Lots of opportunity at the PTA County Council level. Can't fill all positions they ask for.
    - There are opportunities to give input in certain well-directed areas only.
    - One participant noted their principal recently formed a citizens' advisory committee. Others indicated they would like their schools to have a similar committee.
    - Parents are not always on school improvement teams and meeting times are not always conducive to parents.

Input into decisions
- Individual comments included:
    - "It's topic specific whether the Board wants to listen. Some issues are a done deal and on others they will accept input."
    - One participant felt concerns have always been listened to.
    - Board members have made an effort recently to go to meetings; this is a new endeavor.
    - There are some issues the Board has already made up their mind about, but they have to go through the motions (i.e., comprehensive school reform).

- Curriculum evaluation committee– any parent who wrote a letter in protest wasn't invited.

GROUP: BUSINESS LEADERS

Strengths of the district
■ Sense of community in County; schools based around the community; people know families, neighbors.
■Good percentage of students go to college.
■ High standards.
■ "Edline is wonderful."
■ Most of the school community is out and involved, visible. There is integrity and value in being seen in the community.

Improvements needed
■ Promoting the good things schools do.
■ District needs to be more proactive in dealing with local press instead of reactive.
■ Individual comments included:
- Want more info on vocational school and magnets. Need to market programs to parents looking for other options.
- Scholarship program was looking for students geared toward business, but district sent them students with no connection (language majors).
- Ability to partner with various agencies in the community.
- Because of safety issues, it is more difficult to connect and work together.
- One's company used to go into schools to teach interview skills, but program faded away.
- More mentoring of young students by older kids.
- Businesses that aren't really involved don't know how to help. District needs to do a better job reaching out.
- Many of these things go on but aren't promoted. If they were, it could create more interest.
- Newspaper makes front page out of the slightest negative.

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- Depends on who one talks to and where they are in life (young parents or retired).
- Not the best but by far not the worst. Would rank high around the country and in Maryland. "District is primarily why I settled in Harford County."
- Schools in Edgewood get a bad rap in community because of press and because of community, not the school.
- Lots of people in the County have no perception of district because they are new, young or "empty nesters." District is missing communication with this growing group.
- Kids take a lot of pride and ownership in their schools.
- Still all taxpayers – want to know what they are paying for.

- *HCPS Annual Report* is inserted in *The Aegis* and the *Business Ledger*. Need to make it available.
- Need to stimulate interest to get people to seek publications like the *Annual Report*. Many people don't have time to read it.
- Parents want to trust district is doing all it can and most do trust it.
- People don't know how the district is funded. Those who come here from elsewhere are more vocal.
- "We like it here because we're in this together."

Logo
■ Difficult to work with graphically.
- "I know it's historic but when you're out there its hysteric."

Best source of news and information
■ *The Aegis,* unfortunately.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper, but not everyone gets it. Some liked the in-depth nature.
■ Many would rather get it online.
■ Calendars.
■ Individual comments included:
- Don Morrison's done a phenomenal job.
- Create something from schools to feed into the newspaper.
- Get students involved in writing and sending in articles, maybe with business sponsorship. Newspaper club?
- Fundamental issue is content collection. Teachers and principals aren't paid to be PR people.
- Greater Edgewood Foundation.
- Business Roundtable.
- *In the Loop*.
- Through kids.
- Cable network.

Communication improvements needed
■ Need to create a group to provide feedback to the district. Seek out ways to use groups like this [focus group] on a regular basis.

Information desired
■ More resources, help, and info for people who move into County, like a welcome packet. Especially with BRAC in the area. District isn't ready for it.
■ Individual comments included:
- How sports work.
- "Unfortunately, the first place I heard about MRSA was on TV and in *The Aegis* instead of from school. Need to let everyone know about it. Even if it's not a threat, it's a perceived threat."
- "People are suspect if you're not transparent."
- Provide basic PR training to school leaders and teachers about communication.

- They want to help, yet run into obstacles at the district and some schools. Teachers feel threatened by Huntington's free workshops.
- One wanted to partner with the district and had a program put together, but legal counsel had issues.
- Hard to get inside. Some are trying to give money and even that's hard.
- Drive parents to information about scholarships. Hard for parents to find out how to get that information.
- This group very much wants to help kids.

Web site
■ Individual comments included:
- "I use it all the time for information."
- Very confusing, dead ends, education "mumbo jumbo." Need to target-market it to audience. Full of information, but it's still hard to navigate. One participant noted spending 45 minutes to find the school year calendar, then couldn't open it. Most didn't know there is a different way to access the calendar.
- E-mail calendar to parents.
- Advise people that new information is out; pop up for MRSA etc.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
■ Opportunities are there at every level.
■ What's offered to parents sometimes needs to change. Instead of "getting" from parents, district needs to "give" to parents (workshops for helping kids, etc). High school – offer resources, ways to talk about kids who'll be driving soon etc. Just because child is in high schools, doesn't mean they are ready to be on their own.
■ Needs to be a better mix of PR and marketing – "what's in it for me." Not enough marketing now.
■ Workshop on how to get scholarships for kids.
■ Parent mentors.

Input into decisions
■ Board listens but doesn't communicate fully about why they can't respond.
■ Individual comments included:
- "They [Board and administration] listen but are so focused on what they believe to be the right path, that they aren't open to other ideas. They dismissed concerns about kids who aren't going to college ("We deal with that in elementary school"). Hate feeling that 'if you don't go to college, you're not worth it.'"
- District does a horrible job promoting Harford Technical School.
- Help parents understand that there are options.
- System has an attitude of "If you don't go to college, you're nothing."

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Growth.
■ Funding. Have to do so much with so little. Not enough resources to do what's mandated.
■ Staff.
■ Individual comments included:

- Liaison between education and business is so important.
- Chamber has an education committee.
- Need a way for teachers, without fear of repercussion, to share ideas.
- Public Information has a marketing plan but no money to support it.

GROUP: ELECTED OFFICIALS

Strengths of the district
■ Community-oriented.
■ Big bang for the buck – does a lot with what it has.
■ Quality schools; good teachers.

Improvements Needed
■ Individual comments included:
- Perceived disconnect between type of leadership community expects (elected board) and what exists (appointed board). Community is interested in moving toward an elected board.
- Genesis of concern about the Board is communication. Board relies on department heads for information and input. School administrators, PTAs and others don't have the same level of influence.
- Majority of people at Havre de Grace meetings are concerned that with an appointed board they don't have a voice and people are overlooked. They believe that with an elected board they would have a say,
- Perception in Bel Air dealings with Board is that they don't care about what Bel Air thinks. Didn't solicit input on new high school about design or anything until it was a done deal.
- County has an ed specs committee and people share hopes and expectations. District didn't offer community an opportunity for input into Bel Air High.
- Came across as deliberately excluding the community from decisions about Bel Air. Created stress over the auditorium. Were told "You're going to get the Aberdeen High School model." Bel Air had hoped to build a community center and it didn't happen. City had hoped to be a participant in the building of the new high school. They were ready to add money to the project with use as a community center in mind. Sent commissioners and staff to Board meeting to say "give us a chance."
- Havre de Grace – communication with Board also frustrating for them. They are also looking to take care of needs of community.
- City is also ready to put money into athletic field. Little assistance from Board.

Current image of the district
■ Recognized as substantially successful system for a variety of reasons. People move here for success of system and County ambiance.
■ County has enjoyed a favorable education position in the state, but is perceived as slipping in achievement rankings. Can't compete with Howard County Schools.
■ Communication within system is good. Know who to call at what school to get information they need.

- Have had three principals at the high school; none have been from area and made no attempt to find out what's going on in the city.

Logo
■ "Blah."
■ Doesn't matter; not important.

Best sources of news and information
■ Call who they know in different departments to get what they need. Secretaries can get them connected.
■ They call Don Morrison.
■ *The Aegis* is the primary source.
■ Web site, for specifics.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper (if they find it or it's sent to them.) They skim it and find it positive.
■ Individual comments included:
- County Council has more involvement than local government in the school district.
- It's informative to have joint meetings. Should hold them quarterly.
- Only other source of information is County Council minutes.
- *In the Loop* e-newsletter.

Communication improvements needed
■ Individual comments included:
- Disconnect is the nature of a county system; too far removed. Administration is diluted and removed from the actual operations of the system.
- All information is filtered through Public Information Office. Don't know if questions ever get to the Board. Need to work on making the Board accessible to government entities. People want concerns to go right to the Board members.
- Would like to have a relationship with a member of Board to talk to about concerns; have Board members reach out to them.
- Feel attitude of Board is that they "just want cities to butt out."
- Board president went to Havre de Grace meeting. First time someone came to address them.
- Education Leadership Conference was worthwhile.
- Board not responsive to community – typical of a non-elected board.

Information desired
■ Short e-mail newsletters; bullet points. Don't have time to sift through a newspaper.
■ Anything that will impact schools financially at the local level.
■ Individual comments included:
- Information on Title I schools.
- Capital improvements.
- Administrative decisions re: personnel.
- Police activity.
- Planning and facilities.

- MRSA updates.
- Don't always hear about issues from district directly.

Input into decisions
■ This group believes many people feel the Board only gives lip service to wanting input. This is the reason people want an elected board; they want to hold members accountable.
- No one from the district came to a meeting about saving Aberdeen High School. Three invites didn't get the Board there.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ BRAC.
■ Individual comments included:
- Commend district for doing well with the limited level of funding. But it's catching up.
- Providing modern facilities for students.
- Old district office building is historic and important to Bel Air. No one talked to them about what to do with it (reported it would be torn down). Got harsh list of demands from Board about what they'd consider. Could refurbish and use building for professional development.
- Board comes to a decision without ever going through a study process.
- Feel Board "gives the back of their hand" to the public.
- Board gets filtered information from superintendent and staff.

GROUP: CIVIC GROUPS/FAITH COMMUNITY

Strengths of the district
■ Overall, the district is strong.
■ Individual comments included the following:
- Always on the cutting edge. Aggressive about what's being done.
- Excellent superintendent leadership and longevity of leadership.
- Community-minded, good relationships with other organizations.
- Availability of facilities for community use (i.e., by churches).
- Receptive of new ideas.
- The schools use a lot of lay people as contacts on advisory committees.

Improvements needed
■ There is a need for improved communication between the schools and the district so that outside groups receive the same messages from both.
■ There is a need to ensure understanding of district-level decisions about magnet programs and other special programs.
■ Individual comments included the following:
- Magnet schools are good (i.e., the science and math academy) but sometimes the magnet plans don't make sense from the community perspective (e.g. why do we have an agricultural academy?).

- "We need to bring our business and industry leaders in to get their opinions about the programs."
- "How well are we working internships with Aberdeen Proving Ground?"

Current image of district
■ In general, this group believes the public has a positive view.
■ Individual comments included the following:
- *The Aegis* is very negative.
- On the Blue Ribbon schools report – none of the schools listed were in Harford County. Things like that affect public perception, even though people may not know how schools get on the list or anything about it.
- Good stories about test scores or merit scholars need to get more play.
- The system is probably in the "middle of the pack," but it could be exceptional.

Logo
■ There's no "magic" in the current logo, but it isn't a high priority.

Best sources of news and information
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper.
■ People to people – word of mouth.
■ Newspapers.
■ Board of Education meetings.
■ ALERTNOW notification system.

Ways district communicates well
■ "ALERTNOW system is great."
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper is good.

Effectiveness of publications
■ Who gets the *Harford Schools* newspaper? Not everyone gets it.
■ Send the newspaper out to area industry leaders.
■ Taxpayers should get the *Harford Schools* paper – it should be mailed to everyone or at least everyone should know about it or have access to it. The circulation should be expanded.

Web site
■ The most common problem is not keeping the information updated.

Communication challenges/Improvements
■ Individual comments included the following:
- Build an e-mail list and then send links to information.
- A directory of names and phone numbers with departmental and school affiliations would be very good to have.
- Provide an opt-in for online copies rather than paper copies for those who want them that way and more options for e-newsletters.
- Hear a lot about from the Board at budget time, but maybe need more over the course of the year rather than just at budget time.

- "If the Board has something that they want people to know, the Board should get it out and not rely on *The Aegis*."
- Pick some initiatives that really count and then muster the total County.

Parent/Community involvement
■ The faith community is willing to partner with the district in new ways.
■ Opportunities for parental involvement exist, particularly in the area of sports.
■ Individual comments included the following:
  - "We don't feel that we get asked about input into decisions."
  - There's no consideration of the faith community perspective, such as planning activities on Sunday afternoons.
  - It would be nice to have a more defined partnership between the schools and the faith community – both groups are on the same team, and the groups can help each other.
  - When schools need assistance for crisis or for mentors, clergy can help.
  - If clergy leaders knew officially where they could help, they, and their congregations, would be willing to do more.

Greatest challenge facing the district
■ When communication breaks down, the whole system breaks down.
■ BRAC.
■ Defining and maintaining educational and societal standards.
■ Determining the measures of success and getting people unified behind them.
■ Formulas for school planning are a great challenge.

GROUP: RETIRED ADMINISTRATORS

Strengths of the district
■ Perennially well-performing on state tests despite low per pupil spending.
■ Caring teachers and atmosphere.
■ Dedicated staff doing best job they can with students. Teachers are able to demonstrate competence.
■ Academic standards haven't been lowered just to make students or achievement levels look good.
■ Doing an excellent job given ranking as 24th in per pupil spending. Have kept standards high in spite of this but are now at a point where it needs to change.

Improvements needed
■ Technology has improved, but still have a long way to go (compared to countries such as Australia).
■ District is good but could be better.
■ Development is happening so fast in the County, district has a hard time keeping up. Schools are opening already overcrowded.
■ Individual comments included:
  - Need to increase focus on students lagging in basic skills – expand time in math and reading.

- Need to start over with high school curriculum. Need a 21st century curriculum.
- Many recognize the needs, but monetary constraints are an obstacle. The Board and County Council should meet about the budget prior to decisions at meetings.

Current image of the district
■ Superintendent just recognized as Maryland Superintendent of the Year.
■ If *The Aegis* is only source of information, the picture would be negative.
■ Overall, district has a good rating among the public. Those who move to Harford County are pleasantly surprised with the system.
■ Real estate agents add to negativity by pointing clients to particular school areas.
■ Many move to Harford County because it has lower taxes *and* good schools.

Logo
■ Recognizable but dated.
■ Needs to be modernized.
■ All but one agreed it should be changed or updated.
■ Individual comments included:
- It was developed in the 1930's and "Smacks of smacks" (reference to the ruler).
- "Reminds me of 1st grade."
- One participant liked it because it "says learning or education" to him.

Best sources of news and information
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper. But not all retired employees receive it.
■ Web site.
■ News media.
■ Personal contacts in school system.
■ Neighbors – "Some have concerns that are misguided."
■ Individual comments included:
- There is not one source that gives one what he needs. "I have to cruise for it."
- Sometimes difficult to find information. There may be several versions, so one has to work to find out what's true.
- *The Aegis* is very negative; but it does a good job covering sports.

Ways district communicates well
■ Does well with the limited resources it has.
■ Bulletins sent home with students to parents (if actually delivered).
■ Parents can go online to see student's grades. But teachers aren't required to post them, so not all do it.
■ Excellent support from local cable channel. But not all in County can get it.

Communication improvements needed
■ Individual comments included:
- Have heard some people in community feel the Board is not responsive to the public's needs and concerns. But the new Board president is working on changing that.
- Board at times has felt like a closed club; they "answer to no one."

- Superintendent is willing to do what's necessary to meet with various groups (i.e., retiree group and health plan concerns) but bureaucracy often makes it difficult.

Information desired
■ Need to know rationale behind actions.
■ Would like *Inside Track* sent to retiree group.
■ They could be emissaries for the district if they had more information.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper (50 years old). Excellent, well done.
■ Newspaper has important information, but it doesn't go to everyone.
■ *Annual Report* comes out in *The Aegis* (but many people don't subscribe).

Web site
■ Individual comments included:
- Some school web sites could be much better.
- Easy to use, update is well done. Much improved.
- Use, but not regularly.

Information timeliness
■ Information is available if one seeks it out.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper news is old and stale by the time it arrives.
■ Have to use Internet to really stay current with news.
■ *The Aegis* prints articles right after Board meetings.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
■ Depends on the school and the PTAs – some are very active some are not.
■ Some teachers in some schools don't want the active involvement of parents.
■ There are lots of advisory groups with representatives from around the County (i.e., special ed, gifted). Members are actively recruited (not just handpicked). District does a great job with that.
■ Obstacles to involvement:
- Time and work obligations.
- Some people don't think things will change.
- Lots of volunteer opportunities in HCPS and people can only take on so many things.

Input into decisions
■ Individual comments included:
- Some parents are upset that they can't get all their child's needs meet the same way at every school (i.e., bright student would have had to change schools to access program parents wanted for him). Some parents condemn the district for not providing all services everywhere.
- "I know the Board listens and hears, but we don't always get the action necessary."
- Block scheduling is perceived to be the decision of someone at the district that was rammed down everyone's throat. Haven't surveyed students. Have never been provided with information to indicate if it's working or not. Didn't get teacher input as to what they thought about it before implementation.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Keeping up with growth. Already lots of portable buildings on campuses.
■ County is developing faster than schools can keep up with.
■ Additional individual comments included:
- What used to be a rural county is now a county that still has space to build.
- District has no control over what happens with County. Senior developments are approved and then rezoned to allow families, which impacts the district. No money for infrastructure.
- Staffing in special education.
- District shouldn't be 24th in per pupil spending with tax base that Harford County has.

GROUP: SUPPORT STAFF

Strengths of the district
■ Commitment to children.
■ Focus on staff.
■ Quality of education
■ Good results in statewide testing.
■ Communication.
■ ALERTNOW.

Improvements needed
■ Overcrowded schools.
■ Funds for school construction projects. "The state is not funding enough construction and renovation."
■ Disparity between newer schools and older schools (i.e., new Pattersonville schools and other schools).
■ Instructional and support services space. "Interventions need space, and we need to communicate better about what spaces are available, when and where."
■ Increased areas for storage county-wide.

Current image of the district
■ Good image.
■ Concerns about overcrowding.
■ The staff has the reputation of being very hard working. "Staff is creative and inventive – always seeking new ways to assist the diverse populations."
■ AP classes offered countywide.
■ Quality educational programs countywide. "Parents should not be concerned about going to the 'Route 40' area schools."

Logo
■ Needs updating.

Best sources of news and information
- Web site.
- E-mails.
- Weekly school newsletters.
- The secretaries.
- Publications on the web site.
- Administrators.
- Individual comments included:
  - "Sometimes, it's hard to find the directions about where to find forms." (i.e., transportation forms, business office forms, HR forms).
  - Not all employees have access to the web site.
  - Not everyone has the time they need to check e-mail and go online to read information while at work, and not all information can be accessed at home. "With paper, you can take it home and read it."
  - SharePoint is easy if it is used all the time, but if not, it's hard to remember how to use it.

Ways district communicates well
- ALERTNOW.
- E-mail. "Sometimes we're inundated."
- *Inside Track.*
- Access to the Board meetings on Harford Cable.
- Individual comments included:
  - Information about what's happening at the issues level is online.
  - Most employees are not interested in the Board's issues.
  - There's newspaper coverage of issues, but sometimes it is perceived that the newspaper is biased against public education.

Effectiveness of publications
- *Harford Schools* newspaper is excellent.
- *Inside Track.*
- Individual comments included:
  - *Harford Schools* newspaper gives a good cross section of the all the schools in the County and shows the good things that are being done in HCPS.
  - *Harford Schools* has columns and information from the superintendent and the board and is available online.
  - Although there is negative out there, *Harford Schools* helps to counter that.
  - Staff like seeing the list of new hires in *Inside Track,* but some staff would prefer a printed copy over the e-format.
  - *Inside Track* provides a good service to the employees of HCPS. "The 'for sale' column and 'coming events' sections are good."

Web site
- Generally user-friendly.
- Individual comments included:
  - "We visit it to get the e-mail."
  - "We refer parents to parts of the web site."

- The benefits sign-up process is easy to use and is used.

Communication challenges/Improvements
■ Staff members who are not technologically literate are left out of the communication loop.
■ Many cafeteria employees don't have time to access e-mail or information online or have computer expertise – there's a generation gap.
■ Computer techs can help staff to learn the basics. "There used to be more of that sort of staff development, free to employees."

Parent/Community involvement
■ There are lots of committees, such as supervisory committees for safety and security, curriculum and instruction, to get the parents' perspective.
■ If parents what to be involved, they can get involved.
■ "We have family liaisons who do a whole lot in getting families involved."
■ The Family Liaison program (only in Title I schools) really focuses on getting parents involved. "The program represents money well-spent. It should be county-wide."
■ Some schools have much more active PTA programs than others.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Square footage in overcrowded schools.
■ Media and technology. "Not all parents have access at home."
■ Staff keeping up with the technology savvy students.
■ Media coverage. "We need more positive coverage."
■ Capital improvements.
■ State budget issues. "If the state can't provide the resources, then the County needs to step up."
■ State tests and federal mandates. "The testing requirements are not necessarily fair to all students."

GROUP: CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS/OFFICE PERSONNEL

Strengths of the district
■ ALERTNOW is great for employees and parents.
■ Edline.
■ Web redesign.
■ SharePoint is also helpful internally.

Improvements needed
■ Sometimes they are getting outside calls about what's going on and they aren't in the loop. Have to scurry around trying find a person in the know.
■ Take away single days off and take a week in the spring.

Current image of the district
■ Not good.
■ Depends on what's going on at the time – North Harford construction or redistricting is negative.
■ Mixed.
■ Kids are fine with redistricting; it is parents and school status that cause problems.

Logo
■ Outdated.
■ Don't like it.
■ Says "No books."

Best source of news and information
■ *The Aegis*.
■ HCPS web site and SharePoint (if not locked out).
■ E-mail.
■ Bosses.

Ways district communicates well
■ Televises Board meetings.
■ ALERTNOW.
■ On hot issues, district provides progress reports at community meetings.
■ Regional meetings on redistricting.

Communication improvements needed
■ Maybe SOS shouldn't be so limited (some issues are sensitive though and everyone doesn't need to know) senior staff, directors, nurses, transportation.
■ Interdepartmental – doesn't seem to be a good flow between HR, payroll and other departments. Need to figure out a process for interviewing and hiring.
■ Never can get a call back from HR.
■ Issue: central office phones roll to messages.

Information desired
■ Alerts about incidents that happen during the day so they hear before they get home. Some get SOS. If there's a bomb threat, principals are supposed to send a letter home.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper.
   • Waste, it's on web site, costs a lot. People throw them in the trash.
   • Some read it, some don't. Not everyone gets it. Both kids bring it home.
   • It's good news therapy (counteracts calls).
■ *Inside Track*
   • Like it, but what's supposed to be a priority is not always their priority.
   • Like to see who is retiring.

Information timeliness
■ Good; except for HR.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
■ Special Ed offers a lot of workshops for parents.
■ "If you want to be involved, there are plenty of opportunities, but you have to seek them out."
■ There are lots of opportunities; the issue is with communities, not the district. It may be harder for people to participate these days.

Input into decisions
■ Depends on the position one holds. Board and administration don't necessarily listen to everyone.
■ Might be helpful to meet together with the school secretaries. HR won't know staff have concerns or might squelch misperceptions.
■ This group would like to meet for a professional development discussion (not to be taught anything) to share ideas and concerns. Problem is finding time to be away from the office or school.
■ Need to be able to come together and talk about what they can do better (instead of attending another class on phone skills). Meet and confer didn't make a difference.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ BRAC.
■ Traffic.
■ Gangs.
■ Overcrowding.
■ Getting more children who are suffering from more major social/behavioral issues. Teachers aren't trained to deal with it. Public perception is that every child's needs have to be met by the school system.

Communication improvements
■ Individual comments included:
  • Are central office departments fully aware of what goes on in other offices?
  • Lots of central office staff don't understand what it's like to be in a school. It's an entirely different type of busy.
  • Their bosses aren't always in the office so they get sketchy information at times.
  • Communication not any better with move to new administrative building.
  • Maybe have a morning announcement, daily e-mail update or message from the superintendent every Monday morning.
  • District weighs heavy on publication side and not so much on information.
  • Need to be more proactive (always wait for media to come to district).
  • "We have 12 different types of calendars. Can't we have just one?"

GROUP: SCHOOL-BASED ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS/OFFICE PERSONNEL

Strengths of the district
■ Test scores.
■ Graduation rate.
■ Courses that are offered at high school and quality of education. Everyone has same opportunities and can make use of it.
■ Caring teachers. High retention rate.
■ Faculties are well-educated and well-versed in subjects. No matter which part of County you're in, same quality of education is available.
■ Child is focus, from Board down. Strength in numbers and being county-wide.

Improvements needed
■ Consistency. Don't get any resolution until parents call the district.
■ In central office – departments don't know what each is doing. Demands on schools are unreal. They don't have time to respond to requests and sometimes receive duplicate requests from central office. Central office departments ask them to retrieve database info that they could access themselves.
■ Deadlines aren't coordinated among different departments.
■ Mindset is that technology should streamline certain tasks, but some things create more work (i.e. online purchasing procedure).
■ Don't always know who they'll be working for (principal) year to year.
■ All agreed the visitor management system sign in procedure is labor intensive. It requires using a different computer to sign in and to make a badge. Tech has to support it, but no one asked them what to use. Hard to interface it into their workload.
■ Trickle down affect on staff of what has been implemented isn't considered. Didn't provide extra personnel to implement the visitor system, so sign-in for AEW activities took forever. After parents complained, they were told not to use it. District isn't communicating details to them.
■ Central office doesn't back schools on discipline consistently.
■ Not enforcing responsibilities so its inconsistent as to who does what.

Logo
■ Kids say it looks like "no books."

Best source of news and information
■ E-mail.
■ Supposed to check the InfoWeb. If it's important departments need to send an e-mail to them as an alert.
■ Departments are asking them to go check web sites, but every department is asking them to check things (aren't checking with each other).
■ Forms are now on the web site but district hasn't increased the budget to print them at buildings. No budget to make copies. Some send to print shop.
■ Get quicker response when they e-mail central office departments than calling. No school is allowed to have phones go to voice mail, but at central office they rarely get anyone by phone. They leave messages and then send an e-mail.

Ways district communicates well
■ Administration now copies lead secretaries on information sent to principals.
■ Much improved with move to central office building. But they don't have the capacity to be asked to do much more.

Communication improvements needed
■ No one considered the impact on secretaries to do purchasing.

Information desired
■ Snow days – it's on the radio before they get the word.
■ Alert them when something happens at another school. District communicates to public before it does to the schools.
■ Information shared with administrators doesn't always get passed down – policies, goals etc.
■ People ask them questions when out in social environment – they could be ambassadors. Trust them to do their job.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Inside Track* – they like it and read it.
■ Comments about the *Harford Schools* newspaper:
  • Waste, becomes trash in halls.
  • Youngest child count is extra work and it still doesn't get home.
  • Don't always allow for fluctuation and send enough.
  • Put it online.
  • High school kids don't take it home.
  • One can't get enough to send home.
  • Another said her parents don't read it.

■ Comments about school newsletters:
  • PTAs do some. Again need to clarify.
  • Should be a cooperative between PTA and school.
  • Some don't have one.
  • *eSchoolnewsletter* – parents aren't signing up even though it's advertised. People are too busy to read print copy or electronic.
  • Parents just call schools. ALERTNOW helps. Probably more effective at getting important information to parents now.

Web site
■ Use InfoWeb mostly.
■ SharePoint – no explanation for what it is and how to use it. Just suddenly heard about it. Don't understand the purpose. Can't go to one place to find something.
■ Almost like two web pages – profile and official web site.
■ Often have a hard time finding things on InfoWeb. Teachers always need help. Conference forms for travel are in weird spot, hard to find.
■ Parents get confused with public site. School locater doesn't always work. Site could be more user-friendly.

Information timeliness
■ Depends on whether they need a response.
■ Public gets info before they do. They need to be informed and have talking points to be responsive.
■ "Don't sweep things under the carpet."
■ When something impacts schools county-wide, give them responses to use.
■ "If you can't get something done, advise us as to why or when."
■ They get calls when things are going on at other schools (i.e., MRSA).
■ Most central office personnel haven't worked in a school so they don't understand that there are lots of interruptions.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Haven't increased school district staff but haven't decreased central office staff.

GROUP: ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Strengths of the district
■ Teachers – strong and dedicated throughout the system.
■ District is willing to try different things; new strategies to stay on the cutting edge.
■ Support for new teachers; mentors.
■ Good clientele; even low kids are high.
■ Teachers are asked for feedback and administration listens.
■ Administration is a strength.
■ Information is shared and is research-based.
■ County builds capacity for administration internally. "Grow your own administrators."
Lots of teachers were also students here.
■ Outdoor education is a valuable tool.

Improvements needed
■ Individual comments included:
  • Salaries. Going downhill, teachers can't afford to send own kids to college.
  • Too many kids in some places, cap doesn't catch up with where it should be. Some schools are under capacity.
  • Need to redistrict, but Board backs off when parents are vocal.
  • Disruptive behavior of special ed kids.
  • Not enough focus on gifted students.
  • Assistants are with kids all day but not with every teacher's class.
  • Case load for special ed is overwhelming and they are held accountable.
  • Unbalanced way of introducing new curriculum. Get lots of training on some and not enough on others.
  • New programs get dumped on elementary rather than on middle and high school.
  • Some instructional facilitators aren't in tune with what's going on in classrooms. Teachers have concerns about evaluation process.

Current image of the district
■ Families like it.
■ Concern seems to be with Route 40 corridor; that they are sending kids to schools with not enough supervision.
■ Individual comments included:
  • Negative opinion of issues with middle and high school; not consistent across the County.
  • When moved from out of state heard that *The Aegis* goes to great links to be negative about the district, yet don't see Route 40 schools in paper, which is testimony to the quality of the education provided.

Best source of news and information
■ Gossip; word of mouth.
■ E-mail.
■ Web site is getting better.
■ Individual comments included:
  • Had to find out from Lions Club about Bel Air High School plans.
  • Don't know who decides what's important for them to know.
  • Not consistent, depends on schools.

Ways district communicates well
■ ALERTNOW.
■ Not every gossip mill is inaccurate.
■ E-mail.
■ Web site.
■ Administration office is helpful.

Communication improvements needed
■ Accuracy.
■ ALERTNOW – issue with Spanish speakers. Some don't have phones.
■ New teachers get latest info and the rest don't; they have to go find it.
■ Principals need to show support for all they're asking teachers to do.

Information desired
■ Incidents at schools (bomb threat, robbery incident). They would rather know than be left in dark. Even if it's trivial, at least district would be communicating.
■ Be careful of obituaries. Can impact veteran teachers who learn about deaths unexpectedly.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Inside Track*
  • They like it.
  • Use it for more current topics.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper
  • They read it, kids love it.
  • Would like to see issues discussed (i.e., uniforms).

Web site
■ Has gotten better and could be used more.
■ Want to be able to access InfoWeb at home when they have time. Full of good stuff but hard to get to the information.
■ Edline not always updated.
■ Individual comments included:
- As a parent, is disappointed they don't have Edline at elementary level.

Information timeliness
■ Snow day announcements are always made later than Baltimore County.
■ Writing curriculum. Were given it and asked to teach it the next week.
■ Communication is inconsistent; mixed messages. Some were told to teach the writing curriculum every day, others told differently.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
■ Sometimes parents are given too many opportunities; parents run the schools.
■ Sometimes it's a nuisance. Need an administrator to draw the line on parent involvement.

Input into decisions
■ District listens to parents but not staff.
■ They would like a survey to evaluate administrators.
■ Climate survey distributed asks questions designed to get answers district is looking for.
■ "As long as you say what they want, they listen; otherwise you're 'negative.'"
Teachers not really listened to.
■ At school level – some feel they have input into decisions, other don't feel they have any.
- "There are no more teachable moments anymore. When all curricula are regimented, it doesn't fit."
■ School Improvement Teams – many felt they have no flexibility to do anything. They are given the goals, and feel they just plug in names and numbers, not really the how. Not really improving their own individual schools.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ BRAC.
■ Growth and money.
■ Supplies.
■ Conditions of schools.
■ Changing demographics and student behaviors. Trying to keep student achievement up with kids with more challenges.
■ Keeping salaries competitive.
■ Inclusion students.

GROUP: SECONDARY TEACHERS

Strengths of the district
■ Dedicated teachers.
■ Diversity of students and staff (cultural and socio-economic).
■ Teachers have had a great deal of input into curriculum.
■ More successful than most Maryland jurisdictions in test scores.
■ Individual comments included:
   • "We offer a lot of different programs for different types of kids, including magnet programs."
   • "The classic phrase is 'we get a lot of bang for our buck.'"
   • The new administration building won an environmental award.

Improvements needed
■ Get more input from everyone involved in large decisions.
■ Teacher salaries are not competitive with surrounding states.
■ Some geographic areas of the County don't get enough resources or funding.
■ Be sure to listen to staff and parents before decisions are made.

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
   • Public perception is skewed by housing. "People will buy a house here but not there."
   • The parents and community members think they know which schools are good and which schools are not good. "We know that the schools all offer excellent educational opportunities, but parents and others perceive differences."
   • Some people in the community have a negative image of the district. "I don't go to some places anymore because I don't want to talk about the schools because people are so negative about our schools."

Best sources of news and information
■ Students.
■ Each other – word of mouth.
■ E-mail from other staff.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper has "good news," but it doesn't contain the meaty information.
■ Individual comments included:
   • "I don't trust a lot of people at central office, but I trust Don Morrison."
   • "Don has been very valuable to the school system."

Ways district communicates well
■ ALERTNOW.
■ The Harford Cable Network coverage is very nice.
■ Edline has a lot of potential.

Effectiveness of publications
■ The students enjoy looking at themselves in *Harford Schools* newspaper. "It's a great idea to celebrate the kids, and the parents appreciate it, but the dissemination isn't the best."

■ *Harford Schools* online is good because students can send the links to relatives who live out of town.

Web site
■ The new site is difficult to navigate.
■ SharePoint is very confusing.

Communication challenges/Improvements
■ Some supervisors send out a lot of information and the information is filtered through the department chairs.
■ They get good content-specific information.
■ Teachers could use more information about NCLB and state testing decisions. "If we could get updates on HSA and capstones, we could all be on the same page."
■ Individual comments included:
  • Information is being e-mailed that senders seem to expect teachers to read immediately, but they don't read e-mail all day long.
  • Sometimes teachers need the important e-mails to be printed and circulated during the school day so that everyone can be sure to see them.
  • Teachers need to be able to get together to talk to each other and the new school designs don't provide large spaces for teachers to congregate.

Parent/Community involvement
■ Parents are given the opportunity to become involved but they don't always choose to.
■ Some schools have vocal and involved parents and some schools don't.
■ Socio economic factors keep some parents from being involved.
■ Schools provide opportunities for participation.
■ Some events are now being run without parents involved and teachers have taken up the slack.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Meeting the needs of students.
■ Teacher retention.
■ Leadership.
■ BRAC.

GROUP: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

Strengths of the district
■ Individual comments included:
  • Size of district makes it possible to contact individuals in a timely manner. Can get information you need or reach the executive director.
  • Web site is wonderful and they can refer parents to it.
  • District is often represented in statewide presentations, conferences etc. It's evident HCPS is on the cutting edge.
  • HCPS is the largest group at state principals' association conference.
  • Dr. Haas has been recognized, and others as well.

- To a large degree, district has a humanistic focus on kids, is collegial and they can develop strengths within their group.
- There have been growing pains, but district has maintained a small county feel.

Improvements needed
■ Communication between departments. Efforts need to be aligned and departments working in tandem.
■ Don't create programs so swiftly that keeping people in the loop is overlooked.
■ Technology has changed the pace of change and made communication instantaneous. Need to put back a chain of communication. Need to slow it down because the program is better with more input. It's all about managing the technology.
■ Very diverse in size of schools; some programs may not fit the size of the school.
■ Don't forget the human side as district grows. Need to keep people in mind.

Current image of the district
■ Positive among parents who move here for the schools.
■ More parents are coming more informed because they have researched the district on the web. They choose a school before they choose a house.
■ Parents have a positive feeling about HCPS. People come to visit the Darlington autism program.
■ Parents feel very informed through all the avenues.

Logo
■ Individual comments included:
- Been around a long time.
- Old fashioned looking.
- County has traditions it doesn't want to give up.
- Don't care, just has to be about serving youth.
- "When recruiting, other districts have eye catching graphics and it doesn't represent who we are and subtly undermines feeling we're on cutting edge."

Best source of news and information
■ Each other.
■ Leadership meetings.
■ Lots of ways to communicate, but mostly direct e-mail or phone chain.
Individual comments included:
- Agendas have gotten much better for all the meetings. Director and colleagues have gotten more open in discussing things and supporting each other.
- Superintendent is available at least once a quarter.
- Look at *The Aegis*, but just to see how disconnected they are and figure out the slant and be forewarned.
- *The Baltimore Sun* reporter is positive and easier to work with.
- Rely on Public Information Office to ensure accurate info is shared with media.

Ways district communicates well

■ E-mails on instruction are sent direct to teachers so they don't have to pass it on.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper.
■ Web site.
■ ALERTNOW – helps them to communicate quickly. Allows for targeting a group and its easy to use.

Communication improvements needed

■ When there's an emergency at another school sometimes they aren't informed, and then parents call for information. They need information in order to dispel rumor. Keep them informed. It has been inconsistent; sometimes they are informed sometimes not. Neighboring school weren't notified of a lockdown.
■ Find out about information from word of mouth.

Ways Public Information Office can help

■ Clarify what they hear on the news. E-mail principals about what's happening right after news breaks.
■ Would have liked more direction on MRSA, how to respond.
■ Let Public Information Office be gatekeepers for info so they know what's real and what's speculation.
■ Need clear direction on who to contact in an emergency. Bus accident – who to deal with, Don Morrison or bus supervisor? After 4:00, principals are their own. One reported being told on a Friday at 4:00 that she was lucky to reach anyone at central office.

Information desired

■ Weather information, codes, who is essential personnel. Information is inconsistent.

Effectiveness of publications

■ *Inside Track*
  - More a swap sheet; fluff.
  - No information about what's happening in the system.
  - Employees look for it and seem to enjoy it. Tough transition going to online.
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper
  - Has really changed for the better. More articles (they are submitting more info).
  - Nice to have Hall of Fame feature. Goes to tradition and highlights leaders from system.
  - Was more informative in the past.
  - Don Morrison does a good job trying to represent whole school system. Tries to work in everyone's submissions.
■ School newsletters
  - *eSchoolnewsletter* is slow to build, can't use it to reach a large majority, so have to pair with something else.
  - Communication related to *eSchoolnewsletter* hasn't been great. Don't know how to put link on. Would like to train at a lab to see how to use it.
  - Some communities won't have access to respond, so needs to be differentiated to school.
  - Need to make time to learn how to do it. Need a hardcopy handbook.

- Principals keep getting more on their plates to do. Were told to do this on a screen they couldn't see; gave out cards they didn't have enough of.

Web site
■ When information is sent, they have to figure out where to get it unless there's a link.
■ School sites are left up to them. Some parents help then they move on.
■ SharePoint, not all know how to use it. If don't use right away, forget how. Central office uses it often, but principals don't have time to sit and figure out how to use it.

Input into decisions
■ Always have a forum to be heard.
■ Trying to increase input; don't always directly have a voice. They are just told what's happening.
■ They are asked to implement things that sometimes central leadership doesn't know about. Administrative level below Senior Staff is where bottleneck is – with department heads.

GROUP: SECONDARY PRINCIPALS

Strengths of the district
■ Strong instructional focus.
■ High quality teachers.
■ Networking of the principals.
■ Individual comments included:
  - Majority of central staff are available and approachable – they will return phone calls. "We're small enough that the superintendent knows the staff and has a hands-on approach to the system. She is approachable and knows us."
  - "Our schools are safe places. As it relates to communicating, we do a good job of sharing information about concerns."
  - The system provides opportunities for teacher growth.

Improvements needed
■ Additional funding to meet the needs and challenges.
■ Individual comments included:
  - There are not enough funds to provide all the security cameras needed.
  - In instruction, equity is needed. "Some schools need more instructional materials and staff to meet the needs of students."
  - More staff is needed for special education services.
  - The stress factor of the high-stakes testing, with 2014 coming, is difficult. "We have heard for years that HCPS gives more bang for the buck. We may be nearing the breaking point and not be able to provide any more. It used to be a compliment but now it is discouraging."

Current image of the district
■ There is a disconnect between reality and perception in the media.
■ The district is not accurately represented in media.

■ Individual comments included:
- Public media seems to push the perception that the school district is not interested in public opinion. That is not the truth, but that is the perception.
- The Board is really trying to get parental and community input. "We have parents who do come and participate, and parents 'on the bay side' are very appreciative."
- Even when parents don't agree, they appreciate being asked. "Many parents tell us that they love the Harford County schools."

Logo
■ Individual comments included.
- The logo, from a distance, looks like "No reading."
- The logo is very one sided, toward academics in reading and math.
- "Every kid counts" is not represented in the logo.

Best sources of news and information
■ Emails from Don Morrison and other central office administrators.
■ Individual comments included:
- Web site.
- Grapevine for some things.
- Meetings with directors.
- The central office staff provides alerts and heads-up about issues.

Ways district communicates well
■ ALERTNOW is a wonderful addition. Administrators can get to parents with info. Saves a lot of trees.
■ HCPS gets the school closings and delay information out everywhere.
■ Good job of publicizing the good things, like in the *Harford Schools* newspaper. Good information in the *Inside Track*.
■ The calendars are very nice. They support the artwork of the kids.
■ Televised Board meetings.
■ Edline is a source of information for parents, but a district-wide standard on how often teachers should update it is needed.

Effectiveness of publications
■ Effectiveness of publications may be hindered by the distribution mechanisms used.
■ Individual comments included:
- High school students don't take the *Harford Schools* newspaper home.
- Many stakeholders are looking for paperless info, but on the other hand, it's easy to delete an electronic newsletter.
- The parent-student handbook calendar is popular – parents will call for it.
- People use the *Harford Schools* newspaper to find out what's been happening.
- Parents whose kids are in it are very proud.
- *Inside Track* is good for staff – it's news, it's quick, it has want ads and job postings.
- "The *Inside Track* is the one thing I click on."
- Some people would prefer to get paper newsletters rather than electronic.

Web site

■ In general, the web site is easy to use and navigate.

■ Individual comments included:
- The pictures that come up with the news stories are very nice.
- "As administrators, we go to the web site for a purpose, and for us, it's easy to navigate."
- Sometimes it is hard to know where to go for what – SharePoint, InfoWeb, or web site.
- "If we could just put our log-on in once and not have to keep re-entering it to access information, it would be better."
- It would be nice to have a search feature that could go through all of the options at once.
- The site is useful for accessing Board agendas and phone numbers.

Communication challenges/Improvements

■ E-mail volume and other e-mail related issues.

■ More proactive, advance communication.

■ Individual comments included:
- Many people rely too much on electronic communication and forget the need for personal contact. Sometimes the phone or face-to-face is needed.
- Principals don't have to be the point of distribution for all information. The lead secretary could be used to pass information through that channel. Department chairs in the schools could also be a conduit. "We waste time following up on who is following up and duplicating efforts."
- SharePoint has so much on it that it is time-consuming and can be inefficient for us. "Why can't we attach documents to e-mails?"

Parent/Community involvement

■ District offers many opportunities for parent and community involvement.

■ Individual comments included:
- The district solicits comments on policies and issues. Hold forums, study groups or town meetings.
- Parents are invited to be part of committees and to provide input. District is currently looking at a uniform policy, so there is a committee and a planned survey to get input before moving forward.
- The district is currently sending out 2,000 surveys about Secondary School Reform.
- Secondary principals have input into decisions and feel they are listened to and heard.

Greatest challenges facing the district

■ Technology issues continue to be a challenge.

■ Individual comments included:
- A consistent piece of technology software is needed for school use. "This fall, we all experienced problems with scheduling because we could only have certain people using the system at one time and we had to hand out written schedules at the middle and high school levels because the hardware-software could not handle all the needed volume."
- Walking the balance between what people need to know and what they don't need to know is difficult.
- Ongoing issue of security.

GROUP: SUPERVISORS AND NON-TEACHING PROFESSIONALS

Strengths of the district
■ Teacher recruitment.
■ Teacher support.
■ Employees' commitment to their positions and their steadfastness to students.
■ Individual comments included:
- Student performance.
- Excellent curricular programs. "Our initiatives are research-based."
- Generally, good public support from parents.
- In the past few years, new teachers report that they appreciate the increased support.
- District has one of the highest teacher retention rates. "A state survey noted that our camaraderie is great here."

Improvements needed
■ Consistency between campuses.
■ More staff.
■ Better management of e-mail.
■ Communication among the different departments.
■ Individual comments included:
- Facilities are not equitable for class sizes and staffing. Student population needs vary and schools need varying resources.
- HCPS has a low ratio of upper-level administration compared to other jurisdictions that has led to a limited amount of feedback to school-based leadership. "We need more central office administrators to assist the school-level administrative teams. Decisions are sometimes made at the school-level that should be made centrally so that we are all consistent."
- Clarification regarding overlapping communication tools, such as e-mails, SharePoint, InfoWeb, and the external web site. "We're directed to these at various times but sometimes it's hard to find what you need and you're not sure where to look."
- Lack of written practices or protocols for department and school support staff. "Long-time staff with history will take the information with them when they retire."
- Consistent messages across the County about when and how to implement new programs, such as the Content Literacy Initiative, and clearer lines of contacts from schools to central office supervisors. "All school-based staff need to know which supervisor to contact about what."
- Departments need to have more than one person available to return calls or provide information to employees, especially in the area of certification.
- There have been efforts made to clarify the appropriate uses of system e-mail, but there may not be enough information on how to provide a timely response. "We are a dependent network and if we don't get back to one another, then we can't get our work done."
- Parents don't hear back from teachers and administrators quickly enough in all cases – that seems to be a common complaint.

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- The opinions depend on where one is. This is true for teachers and others who work for the district as well as for the public.
- There is a division between the image of the "Route 40" schools and schools on the northern side of the County.
- There is a great deal of local support for the schools. Each school has "raving fans," particularly at the elementary schools.

Logo
■ Although the logo has tradition behind it, it doesn't represent 21st century schools.
■ There's a need for consistency in logo use. "Whatever we do, we need one consistent logo."

Best sources of news and information
■ Technology-related resources.
■ Mentors.

Ways district communicates well
■ *Inside Track.*
■ ALERTNOW.
■ The calendar handbook and *Harford Schools* newspaper.
■ The online archive.
■ SharePoint.
■ Edline; but expectations about postings and updates need clarification.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper is a good publication, but it does not make it home regularly with secondary students.
■ E-schools notifications could be used to point people to the archived issues of *Harford Schools* newspaper.
■ School profiles online are useful. "Once a year, it would be good to send an e-mail about the school profiles."

Web site
■ The vision for Edline was to eliminate the custom school sites.
■ Historically, it was an expectation that all elementary schools have a web site, but not all have resources to help achieve this goal.
■ The redesign is good, but it is not easy to find things like Board policies on it.
■ Vision and mission is embedded in a PDF. "That should be on the home page."
■ Hard to find contact information, such as phone numbers.

Communication challenges/Improvements
■ Technology.
■ Individual comments included the following:
- "We need to be more proactive about benefits and certification info because the information affects people's lives."

- "Why couldn't we have an FAQ area for certification, retirement, maternity leave, etc., so we could have the info available easily? Or, how to add a child to the insurance policy."
- "The size of the e-mail storage is not large enough."
- "The navy uses three communication levels with each for a separate purpose. We need a similar set up. SharePoint is for the files. E-mails are for notifications. That sort of thing."

Parent/Community involvement
■ Depends on the location of the school.
■ The district does its job in providing opportunities.
■ More business involvement and contributions are needed.
■ Individual comments included the following:
- "If you work for one school and have kids in another, calendars conflict and parents can't participate in more than one thing on one night."
- "I'd like to go to the American Education Week activities at my daughter's school but as an employee, I can't do that."

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Consistency.
■ New hires don't know how to get the information they need.
■ More supervisory staff to provide personnel oversight and support.

GROUP: SENIOR STAFF

Strengths of the district
■ Good test scores.
■ Competent, dedicated employees with a strong work ethic.
■ Safe schools.
■ High retention rate of staff.
■ Forward-thinking superintendent.
■ Civility of employees. They try to work together and work things out. Minimal number of conflicts and work at problem-solving.
■ Happy kids and parents for most part.

Improvements Needed
■ Communication – it's reactive rather the proactive. Spend an inordinate amount of time reacting to a few.
■ Information dissemination program is unfocused.
■ District doesn't sell itself. No marketing plan. Need to make community more aware of obligations and responsibilities of district; especially need to raise awareness of the budget. Message isn't conveyed clearly and dramatically.
■ No mechanism to get district side of story out.
■ Some internal inefficiencies in how communication is managed. Need a more defined process for how information is channeled back out in terms of who responds.

■ No "one clear voice" response. (i.e., block scheduling). Example – a question will be forwarded to five people, but don't know who has responded or if anyone has. They waste time chasing down who will respond. Let everyone on the list know what was said.
■ Everyone needs to understand standards for responding to media inquiries. Need guidelines. Sometimes need to take time to respond instead of doling out piecemeal (because didn't have information).
■ Individual comments included:
  • There's a difference in philosophy on how to respond to media. District is now big enough to have a more thoughtful, scripted response. In order to meet newspaper deadlines, answers are not always complete.
  • Public Information Office doesn't have a PR/omsbudsman function.
  • Spend a lot of time letting politics guide decisions.
  • Board not afraid to put all issues on the table and be transparent, but there is no way to respond at Board meetings to inaccurate comments.

Current image of the district
■ Average person whose kids are doing well is pleased with the schools, system, and teachers.
■ Need to approach each audience differently. Targeted communication is needed.
■ Individual comments included:
  • Enough outcry from activists who are always out there makes people think twice.
  • Few complaints about system; complaints are usually about a decision.
  • Usually event-driven.
  • Small group gets reported on.
  • Things that go on with Board rarely are heard out in the large regions. Each feeder has a reputation.
  • Have never responded to activists about whether block scheduling was good or bad.
  • Perception in County is that principals control the district.
  • Perception exists that there's a wide gulf between classroom teachers and the district.

Logo
■ Wonderful in its time. Now outdated.

Ways district communicates well
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper, but it only gets to parents.
■ Employee communication direct to parents/community.
■ ALERTNOW.
■ Web site.
■ Kiosk/TV screen in lobby.
■ Edline.
■ Individual comments included:
  • Hear positives from community about these things.
  • *Harford Schools* newspaper just recounts positives and what's happened. Not about issues under consideration. Hard to get input for stories. Great for marketing (BRAC).
  • Citizen advisory committees function as conduits to bring information into the system.
  • Ad hoc committees help get work out to key stakeholder groups.

Communication improvements needed

■ No communications training is provided for staff.

■ Parents expect district to reach out to them instead of them coming in to us. Maybe go out on more formal basis to each group instead of waiting for them to come to the district.

■ Lacking in internal protocol to disseminate information to staff. Need a general overall philosophy for external communication as well.

■ *Inside Track* is basically a swap sheet.

Ways Public Information Office can help

■ Individual comments included:

- Could do more for employees in morale-boosting. Pride needs to be bolstered.
- People want standards and protocols.

Web site

■ People responsible for content don't know how to treat it as printed media.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement

■ Lots of opportunities available. PTA Council session has potential for hundreds to get involved, but might get 30 to turn out.

Input into decisions

■ Most people gage their level of involvement by whether they get the answer they want.

Greatest challenges facing the district

■ Parent involvement.

■ Budget; adequate resources.

■ Elementary redistricting.

■ Elected vs. appointed Board.

GROUP: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

What students like most about the district

■ Individual comments included:

- "My small high school."
- "My big high school."
- Everything.
- Opportunities at the technical school.
- Wide variety of clubs and activities.
- The help given to students to help them reach graduation.
- Small classes.
- Teachers willing to help students.
- Good extracurricular activities – sports, community service, clubs.

What people need to know
■ HCPS schools are good places to be.
■ Small class sizes at the alternative school give students needed one-on-one with teachers.

Best experiences so far
■ Extracurricular activities.
■ Individual comments included:
- Going with the science group to Costa Rica – for ecotourism.
- Going to the alternative school. "Switching schools to a place that helped me get what I needed – now I make A's and have a good GPA."
- Student Government – going to Annapolis, Girls State, interviewed for the Page program, leadership and communication development.
- Varsity sports.
- The band program.
- Community service club.
- Best Buddies. "Working with these [special ed] kids is very rewarding. Going on trips and things is great."

Recommended improvements
■ More consistency for updating Edline.
■ More support for freshmen and struggling students.
■ Individual comments included:
- "I wish that someone had talked to the freshmen about how important your grades are and that sort of thing."
- The students who need help don't seem to know it until the end of the marking period, when it's too late. "We have Edline and things to check grades, but teachers don't always update them."

What they wish they had known before high school
■ Don't worry about the older students.
■ Join whatever clubs you want.
■ Allow yourself to have opportunities and grow.
■ Don't wait to get involved in school.

How they learn about what's happening at school
■ E-mails and phone calls from the school (ALERTNOW).
■ Morning announcements on TV, the school's electronic bulletin board, and slide shows in the cafeteria.
■ Homework 411 – a TV show on Channel 21 (produced by the Community College).
■ Club bulletin boards.
■ Edline calendar.

Challenges or improvements for communication
■ More information about activities outside of school, such as summer camps, Girl's State and other government-related opportunities, internships, and community activities.
■ More information about clubs and meeting times on Edline.

Web site recommendations
■ More consistency between the information available from the various high schools on Edline.
■ Individual comments included:
- When information is not available on one school's site, students access another school site to find the information they need, particularly related to scholarships and guidance issues.
- Edline really makes students have to explain test scores and project grades to parents, no matter how good the grades are.
- When media specialists update the sites, they put up the how-to links and resource packets, which are good to be able to find.
- Clubs have pages on the Edline site, so if students want to get involved, they can find information.
- Teachers should be more educated about Edline and how to post information there.

GROUP: MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

What students like most about the district
■ Fun school with lots of events; lots of clubs.
■ Nice teachers.
■ "Redistricting helped us make new friends and particularly helped Fallston."
■ Some people underestimate public schools, but they shouldn't.

What people need to know
■ HCPS schools are good places to be.
■ Individual comments included:
- Some people think some schools are bad because students fight, but there are rarely fights and all the schools have really good programs.
- RAVE coupons are good for most students.

Best experiences so far
■ Extracurricular activities.
■ Individual comments included:
- Field trips, (i.e., to Medieval Times).
- Involvement in clubs such as SGA and drama club.
- Intramurals.
- STARS, peer mediators, and helpers.
- The Richardson Run.
- The Turkey Trot.

Recommended improvements
■ Better timing for school construction projects.
■ Improve restrooms at the schools.
■ Improve the water quality or allow water bottles or jugs in classrooms and the gym.
■ Individual comments included:

- Construction should happen in the summer. It's hard to go to school while it's being worked on.
- The portables aren't a really good idea for the winter.

What they wish they had known
■ How to manage lockers.
■ How to manage class-to-class schedules (A and B schedules).

How they learn about what's happening at school
■ Phone calls.
■ Letters sent home from school.
■ Information from teachers.
■ Individual comments included:
- Morning announcements are too long. There's too much to remember and no one really wants to pay attention. "I really like the way my school has announcements on every other Friday for a morning show, because we have a comedy central and it is better. We remember more about the announcements because it is fun to watch and fun to create."
- Eighth graders want to know about what's happening at school, such as when the drug dogs are on campus. "It's better to tell us than to have rumors going around."

Challenges or improvements for communication
■ More information about construction projects affecting students' schedules.
■ More information about redistricting plans.

Web site recommendations
■ More frequent updates for Edline.
■ Individual comments included:
- The middle school Edline helps keep us on track "When you are home sick, you can get information from the Edline page."
- The calendar is good for upcoming events.
- Teachers update Edline on different days, so students have to check it frequently. "It's a good thing that parents can have access because sometimes kids want to hide grades from their parents."
- Edline helps students know more about their grades. "Edline really shows us when we have a 0, so we can find out if there's a mistake and we can fix it."
- It's good to have the Reading Counts information on Edline.

GROUP: BOARD MEMBERS I

Strengths of the district
■ Teachers and staff.
■ Staff longevity in system.
■ Staff that care about students.
■ Strong sense of community in parts of the County.
■ Every community has a level of integrity and passion; tend to draw together on behalf of all.

Improvements needed
■ Individual comments included:
- More parental involvement. Lack of involvement puts a tremendous strain on the schools.
- District is ill-prepared for future change. Does not have the right type of schools and technology. Funding doesn't match desires.
- Political culture of County.
- Difficult to meet with fellow County leaders to focus on good of the County. Political structure costs district at times.
- Getting business and churches more involved.
- One member speaks at a different church every Sunday. Some churches tutoring with schools.

Current image of the district
■ Individual comments included:
- Diversity and bad perception of Route 40 corridor. South ends suffers from perception issues. "They should not be seen as 'those communities;' they are part of all of us."
- Because of *The Aegis*, incidents described negatively.
- People think their schools are great, but the district may have issues.

Ways district communicates well
■ Edline. Hear from parents that it is a great tool to help their kids.
■ Web sites.
■ ALERTNOW.
■ Have made strides as a Board to get more involved by attending PTA meetings. Has helped to soften misinformation and show they are people too. People want someone to listen to them.

Communication improvements needed
■ Always fighting an uphill battle with local newspaper. When Board tries to communicate the right way, things get turned around the wrong way.
■ Can't seem to get beyond the historic negativity.

Effectiveness of publications
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper – too much, font too small.
■ Half of parents don't see it because kids don't take it home.

Logo
■ Archaic.
■ Know a new one is needed.

Web site
■ They use the web site. Check on what's posted.

Opportunities for involvement/engagement
■ Public has opportunity to have a voice in decisions – to speak, e-mail, follow up, through PTA, serve on committees.
■ Comment link on web site and in *In the Loop*.

Greatest challenges facing the district
■ Money.
■ Individual comments included:
   • Hard to communicate how we are changing the way we teach.
   • Bottom of list in per pupil spending. Can't keep asking more for less before it starts to strain and its close.
   • Parental involvement. It's about teaching kids about more than what's in the books.

Outcomes of audit
■ Communicating around *The Aegis*.

GROUP: BOARD MEMBERS II

Strengths of the district
■ Teachers.
■ Well-managed district with a capable senior staff.
■ Consistency in the leadership (superintendent).
■ School-level leaders are committed to the students.
■ Parent support.
■ Results.
■ Good return on education investment.
■ Excellent new facilities.

Improvements needed
■ Communication.
■ Individual comments included the following:
   • "I am amazed at how much people do not know. For example, people don't know about our new high school going up in Edgewood."
   • When an issue does arise, it's very easy for individuals or the press to get misinformation out about it quickly.

Current image of the district
■ Overall, the image of the system appears to be positive, but there are a few negative voices.
■ Individual comments:
   • "We don't get a large number of complaints."
   • "We visit all the buildings, and the feedback has been very positive."
   • "PTAs have asked us to come back. They like being able to talk to a Board member."
   • Negativity in the local press is an area of concern.

Ways district communicates well
■ *Harford Schools* newspaper.
■ The web site.
■ Televised Board meetings.
■ ALERTNOW.
■ *eSchoolnewsletters*.

- *In the Loop* executive summary of Board meetings.
- Individual comments included:
  - Proactive communication with legislators and elected officials has improved.
  - Board members talk with constituents immediately after public meetings.
  - Board has improved in the last four years in the area of communication.

Effectiveness of publications
- The *Harford Schools* newspaper is very good, with interesting articles from various viewpoints (superintendent, Board president, etc.). "The paper is distributed to every family; it highlights the good things that are going on with the schools and the other things the students are doing well."
- The handbook-calendar is effective. "People keep it because info is all in once place, and the Board uses it constantly."
- The Board has received positive feedback about the *In The Loop* summary.
- Individual comments included:
  - Prior to each Board meeting, the Board posts the agenda and related documents for the public to view, so they can take the weekend to read it.
  - *Inside Track* is a good way to share information internally, for teachers and employees.
  - Streamline existing publications and provide some information in a shorter format with links or other ways to receive additional information.

Web site
- The web site redesign has made it easier for people to find information, but sometimes information is still hard to find.
- Individual comments included:
  - Putting HR postings online is a good thing.
  - "Our site is not tortuous. We've come a long way."
  - SharePoint is still a work in progress. There is a lot there but it seems that users have to put in the password too many times to get anywhere.

Parent/Community involvement
- There are opportunities for parent and community involvement, but people don't respond unless it is something that affects them directly.
- More feedback is needed about the annual budget hearing.
- The redistricting topic brought parents to meetings.
- Round table discussions with stakeholders during the strategic planning process provided good input.
- Individual comments included:
  - The education system is very complex, so people seem to "glaze over" when they hear about it. The elected officials don't seem to understand the mandates and layers of laws that school systems work under.
  - Stakeholders can testify, e-mail, call, and participate in citizen advisory committees and on general committees on curriculum, safety, and other areas.
  - Currently, the Board is studying the possibility of implementing school uniforms, and committee meetings are currently occurring, but for the most part, people are not coming out to participate. The Board is sending a questionnaire out about it.

- Parents have their own interests, and once their issue is resolved they don't continue to stay informed and engaged. "People have relied more and more on schools to raise children, but we need parental involvement."
- Everyone is so busy, unless it's a hot button issue, the interest isn't there.
- Parents are more involved at the school and local levels, but not the policy level.

Greatest communication challenge for the district

■ Negative coverage in the local newspaper.
■ Ongoing communication with elected officials.
■ Engaging parents and business leaders.
■ Individual comments included:
- The system puts out information, but people don't always look at it.
- Editorials have been very negative, and that type of coverage does nothing to further constructive debate. Each president of the Board has taken the opportunity to meet with the local newspaper, but the editorial boards are writing opinion based on what young education reporters are reporting about the issues; most of which is inaccurate. The meetings with the editorial board do not help.
- The Harford Business Roundtable has facilitated meetings that have been very positive.

Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions

- What is NSPRA?

- Auditors' Vitae

NSPRA Communication Audit
Harford County Public Schools
Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Harford County Public Schools?
    *   Are there areas that could be improved?

2. How would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
    *   Should the district consider updating or changing the current logo?

3. Where do you get most of your news and information about the schools and the district?
    *   If you have questions or want specific information about the schools, where or to whom do you go first to find it? Are staff members responsive to your needs?
    *   Is information easy to find and access?
    *   How would you prefer to receive information?

4. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the district do well?
    *   Where does it need to improve?
    *   What information would you like to receive from the district or schools that you don't get at this time?

5. I have some district publications here (display samples of selected pubs). Have you seen them?
    *   Are they effective in delivering information to you?
    *   How can they be improved?

    Do you read your school newsletter? Does it provide the information you need about your child's school?
    *   Do you prefer to receive a print newsletter or e-newsletter from your child's school?
    *   How often would you like to receive the newsletter?
    *   How many of you have logged in to the *eSchoolnewsletter* service offered at some schools? Is this an effective way to get information to you?

6. Have you visited the district's web site? Is it helpful and informative?
    *   Is it easy to find the information you are looking for?
    *   What would make it more useful to you as a primary source of information?
    *   How could it be improved?

7. (*For staff*) As an employee, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
    *   Are current electronic communication vehicles such as (InfoWeb, ALERTNOW, etc.) effective in delivering information to you?
    *   What additional information would you like to receive?
    *   What's the best way to communicate with you?

8. Do you feel the district does a good job offering opportunities for parents and community members to be actively engaged in the schools and district?

9. Do you feel district leaders listen to constituents and provide opportunities for you to have input into important decisions?

10. What do you think is the greatest challenge facing the district in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions
for Principals/Administrators

1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Harford County Schools?
   - Are there areas that could be improved?

2. How would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
   - Should the district consider updating or changing the logo?

3. What is your best source of information about what's going on in the schools and district?
   - (If word of mouth) who do you usually hear it from? What kinds of things do you usually hear about?
   - If you have questions or want specific information about an issue, where or to whom do you go first to find it? Are central office staff responsive to your needs?
   - How would you prefer to receive information?

4. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the district do well?
   - How can the district improve communication with its stakeholders (internal and external)?
   - How can the communications office better assist you as a principal/administrator?

5. I have some district publications here (display sample pubs).
   - Are they effective in delivering information?
   - How can they be improved?

6. How would you assess the district's web site? Is it helpful and informative?
   - Is it easy to find the information you are looking for?
   - What would make it more useful to you as a primary source of information?
   - How could it be improved?

7. As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
   - Are current electronic communication vehicles such as (SharePoint, InfoWeb, ALERTNOW, etc.) effective in delivering information to you?
   - What additional information would you like to receive?
   - What's the best way to communicate with you?

8. Do you feel the district does a good job offering opportunities for parents and community members to be actively engaged in the schools and district?

9. Do you feel district leaders listen to staff and provide opportunities for you to have input into important decisions?

10. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district in the future?

**Focus Group Discussion Questions
for School Board Members**

1. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Harford County Schools?
   - Are there areas that could be improved?

2. What image do you believe the community currently holds of the school system?
   - What does the district need to do to strengthen its image and relationships with the community?

3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the district do well?
   - Where does it need to improve?

4. I have some district publications here. (display samples of selected pub).
   - Are they effective in delivering information about the district?
   - Your thoughts on how they might be improved?

5. How would you assess the district's web site? Is it helpful and informative?
   - Is it easy to find the information you are looking for?
   - How could it be improved?
   - What would make it more useful as a primary source of information?

6. How might the district better engage parents, staff and community in helping address issues and challenges facing the district?
   - Do you feel opportunities are now provided for people to have input into decision-making and express their views?
   - What keeps people from being more actively involved in the schools?
   - Are there additional ways the district could encourage community members to be actively engaged in the schools?

7. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the district in the future?
   - What should the district be communicating about this issue/challenge?

8. As a Board member what outcomes would you like to see from this communication audit?

Focus Group Questions
for Student Groups

1. How would you describe your school to someone who just moved here?
   - What do you like most about your school?
   - What do you think other people say about your school? Why?

2. What does the district need to tell people in the community about your high/middle school?

3. What has been the best part of your high/middle school experience so far?

4. What could the school do better to improve your high/middle school experience?

5. Think back to when you were a freshman/6th Grader – what do you wish you had known when you first started high/middle school?

6. How do you learn about what's going on at school?

7. What information would you like to get that you don't now?

8. Do you ever visit the school web site? The school district web site?
   - Is it helpful? Can you find the information you need?
   - How could it be improved?

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and the U.S. Dependent Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission through a variety of diverse services that we provide to our members and to other school leaders who contract with or purchase products from us.

With over 70 years of experience, we have a reputation in the field for practical approaches to solving school district and agency communication problems. We have useful communication products, offer workshops and seminars, maintain resource and research files, have contacts and resources within the corporate communication industry, and have 34 chapters throughout the country that provide local networking opportunities for members.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides workshop assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations. For many of these groups, we have completed research-based communication audits to analyze the communication flow, targeting, content, and effectiveness of their communication messages.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication workshop any-where, is held each July. This four-day session offers more than 70 topics on a wide array of school communication issues. The 2008 Seminar will be held in Washington, D.C.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter *Network* is seen as a communication resource for school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major problem and explains how commu-nication can play a vital role in solving it. *PRincipal Communicator* is our building-level PR newsletter which provides practical help to school principals and other building-level leaders. The calendar and variety of communication topics are helping many to effectively improve communication at the community level. Our four electronic newsletters, *NSPRA This Week, The NSPRA Counselor*, *NSPRA Alert*, and *Opportunities*, provide 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 electronic newsletter targeting communication issues and topics for school system leaders.

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 Educational Leaders Consortium 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). The association also sponsors four national awards programs to bring recognition for excellence in communication to individuals, districts and agencies.

More information about NSPRA is available at www.nspra.org.

Karen H. Kleinz, APR

Karen H. Kleinz, APR, associate executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), has 27 years experience in public relations, working in the private sector as well as public education. She has won numerous state and national awards for her work. She is also accredited in public relations (APR).

Since joining NSPRA in 1998, Karen has led the Association's public engagement efforts and has represented NSPRA in collaborative partnerships with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the Study Circles Resource Center and the Kettering Foundation. Over the past two years she has directed NSPRA's learning contract with the Kettering Foundation to develop a community audit process designed to help school systems and communities assess their ability to successfully engage each other in supporting student achievement and building public ownership of schools. She has also been very involved in the issue of school violence and in helping schools and educators communicate with their publics in a crisis situation, including providing on-site assistance to the Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools communication department in the aftermath of the Columbine High School tragedy. She served as editor and project coordinator in revising the second edition of NSPRA's popular *Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual*.

Karen has developed and managed school public relations programs for diverse school districts, from small, semi-rural districts with large non-English speaking minority populations to the largest elementary district in Arizona, serving suburban Phoenix. As director of district public relations she was responsible for internal and external communications, including serving as spokesperson in crisis situations. She also was responsible for media relations, overseeing district publications, training administrators and teachers in effective communications, promoting community involvement and volunteerism in the schools, coordinating bond election campaigns and engaging the public in deliberative discussions about education through study circles and community forums.

Her district experience includes operating as a one-person office to supervising a communications staff that included a full service print shop. She has created award winning public relations offices in districts that had none, and expanded programs in districts with established departments. Kleinz also operated a public relations consulting business in Arizona specializing in school communications. As a consultant she assisted schools and districts in developing a positive image and work environment through improved communications. She is the co-author of NSPRA's best selling *Unlocking Sensational Service: Tools for tapping the people power in your schools* CD.

Before joining the NSPRA staff, Kleinz served on the NSPRA Executive Board as Vice President of the Southwest Region and twice served as President of the Arizona School Public Relations Association. She was also a member of the Teacher Venture Arizona executive board, a non-profit group of business and school leaders who distribute classroom mini-grants to teachers annually, and was a founding board member of the Yuma County (Arizona) Educational Foundation.

Carol Y. Mowen, APR

Carol Y. Mowen, APR, senior associate with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), has 20 years experience in education, including 10 years in public relations positions and 10 years as a teacher. She has won numerous regional and national awards for her work and is accredited in public relations (APR).

Prior to joining NSPRA, Carol developed and successfully directed school public relations programs for school systems in both Mississippi and Maryland. As public information officer for two systems (a small rural district of about 5,500 students and a mid-size suburban district of about 21,000 students), she was responsible for internal and external communications and served as spokesperson in crisis situations. She also was responsible for media relations, district publications, and training administrators, teachers, and support staff in effective communications. In addition, she spearheaded a customer service initiative, managed a web site redesign process and a district branding project, developed a subscriber email process, and implemented an employee recognition program. Her district experience includes operating as a one-person office and supervising a small communications staff and publications department.

A past President of the Chesapeake Chapter of the National School Public Relations Association, she also served in several other leadership roles on the Chapter's Executive Board. She was instrumental in the Chapter implementing two awards programs to recognize members, starting a monthly member e-newsletter, and initiating a web site redesign process. Under her leadership, the Chapter created a membership directory and began a formal mentoring process for members who pursue accreditation. Carol has developed and delivered sessions at CHESPRA Conferences and at NSPRA Seminars.

During her teaching career, Carol was honored as a Star Teacher by the Mississippi Economic Council and received a Good Apple Award from the Jackson Public School System. She taught Latin, English, and Speech at both the middle and high school levels and also served as a reading resource teacher. In addition, she taught Freshman Composition at the community college level. She was named the Best Director by the Mississippi Theatre Association for her work with Callaway High School's drama troupe. Carol holds a Bachelor's degree in English from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and a Master of Arts in English from Mississippi State University in Starkville, Mississippi. While teaching, she completed additional coursework at Towson University. Carol has also graduated from two leadership development programs, Leadership Natchez and Leadership Hagerstown.