

# ***NSPRA's***

---

## **Communication Audit Report Recommendations**

*Prepared for the*

*Robbinsdale Area Schools  
New Hope, Minnesota*

*August 2005*

---

## Table of Contents

□ Introduction	Page	3
□ Key Findings		7
□ Guiding Principles		8
□ Appendix		39



---

# Introduction

## Goal of the communication audit

As the populations of the suburban Minneapolis communities served by the Robbinsdale Area Schools change and school enrollment declines slightly and becomes increasingly diverse, the need to communicate effectively has become a key component of district operations. The Board of Education and Superintendent Stan Mack recognize this and are committed to improving communication throughout the school system in order to better serve all students and stakeholders. This communication audit was contracted for, approved and supported by the superintendent and Board. It demonstrates the Board's willingness to address communication challenges related to the changing education landscape in Minnesota in order to improve educational opportunities for students.

The challenges of maintaining public confidence, stabilizing and increasing enrollment, embracing an increasingly diverse population, reaching broad consensus on the local value and priority placed on education, and communicating effectively with all segments of seven different communities, affect not only the school system but the communities it serves as well. Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of internal and external audiences, it was obvious to the auditors that there is a tradition of support of and loyalty to the Robbinsdale Area Schools that has been built on a solid foundation of quality programs and responsiveness to stakeholders.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek data, opinion and perceptions, and from these to propose recommendations to improve the effectiveness and management of public relations, marketing and communication throughout the Robbinsdale Area Schools. The recommendations presented in this audit are designed to improve two-way communication between the district's internal and external stakeholder groups.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district's community relations office or any other department or school, they are intended to improve communication in a school system that is committed to continuous improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all of its students and constituents to the best of its ability.

It is difficult to measure public relations overall. 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, however – including a communications program – is to determine whether it is helping the organization work 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 goals and objectives.

## Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of the Robbinsdale Area Schools provides an important foundation for developing a comprehensive communication plan for the district. The audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the overall community relations 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, and several individual and small group interviews representing a variety of the district's internal and external publics. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group sessions were one hour in length, and were held on May 16-18, 2005 with the following groups:

- ❑ District Cabinet
- ❑ Administrative Assistants (for executive directors)
- ❑ Principals
- ❑ Drivers/Custodians/Food Service
- ❑ School Secretaries
- ❑ Middle School/High School Teachers
- ❑ High School Students
- ❑ Teaching & Learning/Community Ed Managers
- ❑ Business/Technical Office Managers
- ❑ Parents – All Grade Levels
- ❑ Community Education Users
- ❑ Parents – Secondary Level
- ❑ Parents – Pre-school/Elementary Level
- ❑ Activities Directors/Asst. Principals/Counselors
- ❑ Preschool/Elementary Teachers
- ❑ Community Partners
- ❑ Public Advisory Councils
- ❑ Non-traditional Education Staff
- ❑ Educational Assistants/Office Employees

## Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association enables a school system to view its communications from an “outside” perspective. This audit was performed by seasoned communications professionals with many years of experience in educational public relations and communications. The consultants for this communication audit were Karen H. Klein, APR, associate director of NSPRA and Judith Davis, APR, NSPRA consultant. Background information on each auditor is included in the appendix of this report.

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the community relations 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 news clippings, demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, etc.

The core of the audit is the on-site focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the school system's internal and external audiences. In our audit of the Robbinsdale Area Schools, the consultants met with 19 focus groups and conducted a number of individual and small group interviews with key district leaders and communications staff. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. Their responses are reported in the Summary of Focus Group Perceptions section of the report. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the district's 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 and communication activities for the Robbinsdale Area Schools.

Following the review of materials and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared recommendations, presented in the Recommendations section of this report. The recommendations focus on strategies the district can use to organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to deliver key messages as effectively as possible and improve its overall communication practices. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR.

## **Guiding Definition**

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has worked with school systems, education organizations and agencies throughout North America 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 relations programs:

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

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

## **Assumptions**

It is assumed that school systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations/communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view the system 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.

Some of the comments noted in the focus group summaries may reflect concerns that will not be included in our recommendations, but they may be issues Robbinsdale Area Schools' leaders will want to address in order to help resolve employee or community concerns.

## **Recommendations**

In response to the key findings, this report contains recommendations for improving communication with Robbinsdale Area Schools' 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 focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop 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 common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. These include:

- ❖ Overall, Robbinsdale Area Schools is seen as a solid, traditionally strong school system that projects a sense of community to those it serves. Focus group participants consistently praised the district for the variety of programs and opportunities that it offers students at all levels, particularly in the arts. Specialty academic offerings such as fine arts, language immersion, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate were also cited as program strengths. Early childhood and community education programs were viewed as strengths as well.
- ❖ While the image of Robbinsdale Area Schools is generally positive, there was a recurring theme in many of the focus groups that this is changing and beginning to slip. Several groups commented that perceptions of the district are worse than what it truly is and expressed concern that the district is not doing more to market itself and the excellent programs it offers. Many seemed to feel that Robbinsdale Area Schools has an image of being an “aging” school system that is no longer considered one of the premier systems in the region as housing growth moves farther out.
- ❖ Although focus group participants felt that changing demographics and increasing diversity present challenges for the district, many also believe that diversity is one of the district’s strengths and something to be celebrated.
- ❖ Robbinsdale Area Schools received many compliments on its responsive, caring staff members. Many of the focus groups noted the active parent involvement in the schools as well as the strong adult participation in the Community Education program.
- ❖ Although the district uses a variety of communication vehicles to reach stakeholders, the focus group participants – both internal and external – overwhelmingly cited “word of mouth” via personal contacts and the *Sun Post Clips* e-mail sent from the community relations office as primary sources of information. The *Sun Post* appears to be an active partner with the district and is relied upon by community and staff for school information. Focus groups also expressed frustration over a lack of consistency in communication efforts – particularly in message content, how it is communicated and who is communicating. Employee focus groups indicated that *Direct Line* is useful as an information source, but overall internal communications is seen as needing improvement.
- ❖ Among employee focus groups, there was a strong belief that the district needs to establish processes and procedures in all areas of communication (i.e., standards for responding to e-mail and phone calls; chain of command protocols; crisis communications). This perception also relates to the issue of consistency in communication.

- ❖ The general reaction of focus group participants to the reorganization process is that while well-intentioned, it was poorly structured and again, perceived as inconsistent in how the issues were communicated. While they appreciated the opportunity to be heard, they did not feel they were listened to. Most participants felt that stakeholder input was not actually considered and that decisions had in fact been made before the process began. Many felt that the design of the process put “the cart before the horse” and there was no real closure at the end.
- ❖ The focus groups felt that challenges facing the district include standardizing communication practices; communicating with diverse and multi-lingual publics; rebuilding trust; ongoing boundary realignments; building support for future referendums; class size; discipline; and funding.

## **Guiding Principles for the Robbinsdale Area Schools Communication Effort**

### **1. *All communication efforts must be tied to the district’s goals and objectives.***

To be effective, communication efforts must be driven by the district’s overall mission, goals and objectives and be designed to support teaching and learning. Communications should focus on where teaching and learning take place — at the building level — and inform the public of progress toward goals.

### **2. *Strategic communication requires research and evaluation to be woven throughout the communication effort.***

No plan will be successful without research and evaluation components. While this audit provides a starting point, additional research, such as readership surveys on publications and assessments of special programs and events, needs to be completed on current communication efforts. In addition, once a strategic communication plan has been developed, major components, such as internal communications, should be evaluated each year. The research component of the plan should capture baseline data that can be used to mark progress in selected areas of the communication effort. Communication should be a component of the annual evaluations of district administrators and principals each year as well.

### **3. *A major core message should position Robbinsdale Area Schools as “the district of choice” for quality teaching, learning and student achievement.***

Service industry leaders, such as Nordstrom’s and Disney, are known for one or two core values. Every school district and school should also be known for its core values. As more families take advantage of Minnesota’s open enrollment options, Robbinsdale Area Schools needs to emphasize its program strengths to market the schools and rebuild the district’s image as an educational leader in the state.

4. ***Internal communication must be a priority.***

No communication effort will be successful if employees do not become ambassadors for teaching, learning, student achievement, their schools, departments and the Robbinsdale Area Schools. Staff members have the ability to make or break the image of their schools and the district. Employees who are negative, non-responsive or unable to provide timely and appropriate answers to parent and community requests will quickly undermine any communication effort. Employees should be provided with the information, tools and training needed to support them in their roles as “Ambassadors for Achievement.”

5. ***The communication effort should focus on engaging stakeholders to take action on behalf of students.***

A strategic communication plan should be designed to seek action by parents, community members, business leaders, staff, and others to find ways to improve teaching and learning and support student achievement in Robbinsdale Area Schools. To be most effective, this should be a collaborative effort that seeks out the resources and expertise of citizens and community organizations. It should involve a structured, ongoing process to engage the public and promote an open dialogue on educational issues and goals.

6. ***People programs beat paper and mass media when it comes to engaging audiences to action.***

People are persuaded to action by others whom they respect or perceive as knowledgeable. When interpersonal connections are made by credible opinion leaders and spokespersons, people are more likely to be persuaded to action. Influential peers, such as respected staff members or parent leaders, are often the most effective advocates for education. The communication effort should also demonstrate that Robbinsdale Area Schools are customer-friendly and committed to responding to citizen concerns in a timely manner.

7. ***School building-level communication should be the major thrust of the communication effort.***

Research in school communication shows that the local school is usually seen as the public opinion barometer of how well schools or school districts are doing. It’s a natural hub for communication with parents and others and should become the central focus of the communication plan.

8. ***Technology should continue to be used and enhanced to support an efficient, timely and effective system of communication.***

The district should continue to move toward a paperless information distribution system wherever possible. E-mail, voice mail, web sites, electronic surveys, and the employee Intranet can all be used advantageously to improve and expand the district’s communication infrastructure.

**9. *Use triggering events to focus attention on teaching, learning and student achievement.***

Communication efforts are enhanced by triggering events that remind the public of the district's mission and the progress being made by students. The Principal for a Day program is one such event that successfully showcased schools and education programs to community leaders, creating positive responses and new supportive relationships.

**10. *Strategic communication and public relations is a management function.***

An effective communication and public relations program must be a planned, systematic effort based on two-way communication with stakeholders. The district cannot depend on the news media to deliver key messages to its constituents. A variety of communication vehicles should be used to connect with key audiences. At all levels, it is imperative that communication occur consistently and information be presented with clarity. In order to accomplish this with efficiency, processes and procedures should be established to support the two-way communication effort.

## **Recommendations**

This report contains many more recommendations than can be accomplished in a single year. We present them to provide the Robbinsdale Area Schools with overall guidelines for establishing a long-range comprehensive communication plan. This report can then be used to help identify target areas to address each year. We suggest focusing on Recommendations 1-9 to begin.

### **Recommendation 1: Develop a Strategic Communications Plan.**

Simply generating more information does not constitute an effective communication effort. It is helpful to remember PR guru John Budd's communication maxim: "*Waxing a car doesn't make the engine run better.*" Effective communication should be planned to support the district's mission and strategic goals. It should also focus on involving people 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 community relations office has developed specific communications plans for recent special initiatives such as the reorganization, but it currently does not have a comprehensive strategic communications plan to guide its overall efforts. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the communications program, a framework now needs to be fully developed to identify target audiences and key messages, specific action steps for each of the district's goals and objectives, timelines and responsibilities, and evaluation tools. The recommendations included in this report provide some proven strategies that can be incorporated into a strategic communications plan.

The plan should take into account all of the district’s major audiences (i.e., teachers and support staff, parents, students, business leaders, community members, retirees, news media, etc.), the information they need and want to know, and the channels of communication that will be used to reach them.

An effective strategic communications 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 tell them?
6. What do we want them to do with the information they receive?

A comprehensive plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the district’s communication efforts because all projects are considered in terms of whether or not they support the district’s goals and objectives. It helps to ensure that key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm large school systems. The comprehensive plan also provides a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability through evaluation criteria built into the plan.

A well-defined communications plan builds understanding and staff involvement in district communication efforts, and encourages telling the district’s story in “one clear voice.” 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.

In addition to the overall strategic communications plan, the community relations office should continue to develop specific communications plans for any major initiatives or projects planned for the year, such as referendums, policy changes, more reorganization plan discussions, etc. With the increasing minority populations in some communities served by the district, special attention should be given to planning communications for these groups. This communication strategy also applies to any unexpected developments or crises that might arise during the year.

The executive director of community education/community relations and the communications director should work with those administrators and departments responsible for various projects to develop communications plans and assist them with the implementation of communication strategies. This type of solid communication planning will help the district avoid the controversies that can arise due to poor communication. NSPRA has samples of strategic communication plans the district can use as guides.

## **Recommendation 2: Develop a clear, consistent message that is delivered in “One Clear Voice.”**

There is a great deal of pride in and loyalty to Robbinsdale Area Schools that was evident in the focus groups. The district is seen as being responsive in meeting student needs through a balanced academic program that includes the fine arts and is praised for fostering a sense of community – strengths that should be capitalized on in all communications. A major core message should be that Robbinsdale Area Schools is the district of choice — where children excel in a caring learning environment that is rich in program and cultural diversity. A core message reflecting the district’s mission and delivered consistently in “one clear voice” by all staff will help to build a “brand name” in the community.

The district should consider developing a positioning statement for use with the logo. For example, “Robbinsdale Area Schools, A World Class Community of Learners,” or “Robbinsdale Area Schools: Excellence in Academics, Arts and Achievement.”

An alternative is to develop themes periodically that supplement the mission statement and core message and reinforce a specific goal or initiative. In either case, we suggest that staff, under the direction of the superintendent, be involved in developing a positioning statement or theme to create a sense of ownership and insure their support. This could serve as a rallying point for staff, students and community members and reinforce the expectation for excellence.

Staff members mentioned a number of times in the focus groups that they often feel left out of the information loop, and this lack of knowledge directly impacts their ability to do their jobs and effectively communicate with the public. Focusing communications around a central theme will provide staff members with the key messages and focus they need to embrace their roles as ambassadors of the district.

Whenever the district 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 insure clarity and consistency in its messages.

## **Recommendation 3: Incorporate key issue content messaging and management into the communication effort.**

While core statements and themes constitute the foundation for communicating clearly and consistently, managing the content and delivery of messages around key issues should be viewed as the framework for the strategic plan. Proactive communication involves identifying key issues facing the district and determining what information stakeholders need and the best vehicle to deliver it to them.

People appreciate hearing the “good news” about their schools, but trust and credibility are built through open communication about the business of the school system – good and bad.

The public is interested not just in what decisions are being made about the education of students, but also the rationale behind the decisions, particularly in the area of funding and fiscal expenditure. It is important to foster open communication so that the school system is perceived as one that shares all the news.

Key issues and challenges that will impact communications in Robbinsdale Area Schools include enrollment, funding and the implications for programs, class size and employee contract negotiations; building relationships with increasingly diverse publics; and reorganization and a future referendum. Our recommendation is to take a look at these issues in numerous ways and then reduce them to key, consistent talking points or messages that will help shape the future of the district.

It may also be helpful to put teams together to help assess specific issues and frame messages. For example, many focus group participants felt that diversity is one of the district's strengths, but that this is often perceived as having a negative impact on resources. The message about diversity in Robbinsdale Area Schools should be reframed as a positive attribute and desirable component of a world class education.

We recommend, however, that the "wordsmithing" of messages be the responsibility of the professionals in the community relations office. For each issue's hot buttons, consider a single fact sheet that can be used in numerous ways. It can be made available on the web site and e-mailed to key communicators and employees. Printed copies could be placed in school and district offices or at local dentist/doctor offices and other businesses.

As an example, a fact sheet outline on future boundary changes might include the following:

<b>Issue at a Glance:</b>	School Boundary Changes
<b>Description:</b>	Population shifts continue to require enrollment balancing at some schools in order to provide optimum class sizes. (Listing of key messages/talking points on this issue.)
<b>Work to Date:</b>	Explain current efforts and timelines to address changing needs. (Saves staff time in explaining what has been done on this issue in the past).
<b>Barriers to Progress:</b>	List of items such as budget, time, approvals, etc.
<b>What's Next:</b>	Explain work yet to be completed. Support and call for action by various groups. Next meeting dates listed, if appropriate.
<b>Your Involvement:</b>	You can help the Robbinsdale Area Schools with this issue by . . .
<b>Further Info:</b>	List contacts.

These fact sheets could be released periodically in numerous ways. They could be placed on your web site as key issues. With a click, patrons could access the fact sheets. They could also be e-mailed to your Key Communicator Network (See Recommendation 8). Messages could be adapted to use in other regular internal and external communications, thus assuring that consistent messages on key issues are being disseminated and reinforced. Such 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.

Key messages should also support initiatives that the district is undertaking for the year. It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Some suggestions for disseminating key messages include:

- Share key messages with the Key Communicator Network.
- Communicate messages in speeches to senior citizens, business/civic groups, Realtors, legislators, parent groups, etc.
- Communicate messages to staff via staff meetings, internal newsletters or e-mails, etc.
- Include messages as headings on district and school web sites and publications.

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 system, a list of programs and initiatives that directly support the district’s goals and objectives as well as information on progress toward those goals. Some districts print pocket cards with key messages or print them on the back of staff ID badges. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that employees appreciate having the information in order to feel confident that they are truly voicing the school system’s position and message.

#### **Recommendation 4: Incorporate branding and marketing strategies into the communications plan.**

We recommend that Robbinsdale Area Schools strengthen its approach to marketing itself and its schools. The district has a solid reputation and is known for its outstanding fine arts programs at a time when many districts are making cuts in this area. Academic offerings such as fine arts, language immersion, International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement, as well as strong Early Childhood and Community Education programs, provide attractive in-district choice options.

Focus group participants described Robbinsdale Area Schools as an “established district,” one in which families have a history – generations have graduated from its schools, and those who leave often return to teach in the district or raise their families here. Although the school system incorporates seven cities, many participants cited the sense of community and the spirit of cooperation that exists between governing entities that helps tie the schools together.

This should be used to help retain families who are contemplating enrollment in other districts, private schools, home schooling or other alternative education programs. The district’s

September, 2004 Outward Enrollment Opinion Survey indicated respondents wanted schools with a good overall reputation, challenging curriculum and safe and orderly environment. Based on the focus group and opinion survey results, the marketing effort should focus on Robbinsdale Area Schools' established reputation for having safe, community schools with a challenging curriculum and multiple, quality options for students and families. Focusing on student and staff member success stories is another good option for highlighting quality. Some strategies include:

- **Use a positioning statement with the district logo** – As noted in Recommendation 2, using a positioning statement in conjunction with the district logo would help “brand” Robbinsdale Area Schools in the community. The district’s current logo, while graphically clean and crisp, gives no visual clue that it represents education other than the name of the school system. Ideally, both the design of a logo and an accompanying positioning statement would clearly indicate that the organization is about children and education. Adding a positioning statement that makes this connection would help deliver this message.

The district should also review how its name is presented in various formats. In our review, we found the district referred to by three different names (Robbinsdale Area Schools; District 281; and Independent School District 281). This can be confusing, particularly for families new to the area. We recommend the district settle on a single usage and present it consistently on all materials, electronic sites and signage.

- **Evaluate marketing needs and identify target audiences** – The advent of Minnesota’s Choice is Yours program, along with slightly declining enrollment across the district, underscores the need for marketing in order to retain existing students and attract new ones. The district has some informational materials that are available across the district (i.e., *Information Guide*; kindergarten registration pamphlet; IB pamphlets, etc.). However, there are no defined marketing goals at this time. In order to use limited communication dollars wisely, Robbinsdale Area Schools needs to determine:
  - What it is marketing (what message it wants to send);
  - Who the target audiences are;
  - How it can most effectively deliver the message (what communication vehicles will be used); and
  - When the best time is to deliver the message.

Once needs, goals and audiences have been determined, marketing materials should be evaluated. Some of the existing information materials developed by the community relations 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 materials produced for use across the district.
- 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 more 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 video.

Some additional marketing ideas to consider include:

- **Create targeted audience information packets** – A basic information packet can be adapted to serve a variety of audiences such as real estate agents, families considering a move to the area, business leaders, elected officials, and potential teacher recruits. What will make these most effective is to provide only information specific to the target group so people do not need to sift through materials that aren’t pertinent to them.
- **Evaluate “first impressions” at schools** – We recommend that Robbinsdale Area Schools examine the first impressions that visitors get when calling or visiting a school. While employees are well-intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception based on how a phone is answered or the “curb appeal” of 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. Students also should feel that their school presents a caring and welcoming environment to them, with all staff members supporting student success.
- **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. The district’s very successful Principal for a Day program demonstrates this clearly. Robbinsdale Area Schools should consider developing guidelines for offering school tours to community members, and particularly parents of pre-schoolers and new residents. 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.
- **Offer an information seminar for real estate agents** – An effective component of a targeted marketing effort is a seminar for real estate agents. The 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 them to an annual breakfast or luncheon meeting in one of your schools. Remind agents that they can access information on key school events and issues from your web site. You may also consider offering a bus tour of the district or of 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 community leaders need to be kept informed on how the district is handling current issues such as reorganization so that they don’t give out false impressions or inaccurate information

about Robbinsdale Area Schools. We recommend that you meet periodically with representatives from each firm that sells homes in the district.

In some districts, real estate broker or agent groups are now funding the cost for the district to host a seminar. Robbinsdale Area Schools should investigate possibilities for partnering with a real estate group to provide information sessions or seminars.

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 residents who have left the Robbinsdale Area Schools and enrolled their children in other school systems or alternative programs. Before you can market effectively to this group, you first need to research and understand exactly why they left and where they placed their children.

Many focus group participants recognized the need to inform the public about the programs Robbinsdale Area Schools offers and expressed concern that the district is not doing enough to promote itself. As neighboring districts intensify their marketing efforts, and as the school-choice movement continues to grow, traditional communication efforts will not be sufficient to keep pace with new competitive pressures. A plan that identifies target audiences and key marketing messages will help the district establish its “brand” in the greater Minneapolis area.

## **Recommendation 5: Become more systematic with communication efforts.**

One of the challenges in a large 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.

The following strategies have proven effective in helping to systematize communication efforts:

- **Meet individually with school principals on their turf** – Every school has its own personality and the communications director should schedule time to meet with each principal, tour his/her school and talk about communication issues and goals, both for the district and for the individual school. Obviously, this can’t be done all at once, but making time once a week to meet with a principal will help with identifying and prioritizing critical communication needs that may need to be addressed at the district level.

While it is not feasible, given the size of the district, for the communications director to work closely with every school to improve their communications, an option that has worked well in other large districts is to identify one or two schools each year that the community relations office will work closely with on improving image and developing a

comprehensive school communications plan. Start with principals who are interested in improving public relations and communication, as they are most likely to invest the time and energy needed to develop a successful program. In Robbinsdale Area Schools, we would suggest focusing first on Cooper High School, since some focus group participants cited specific needs for improvement in its communications and image. With the arrival of a new principal, it is an ideal time to start fresh with the communication effort.

- **Implement a district PR Network or Cadre** – Ask each principal to appoint a staff member to serve as representative to a district PR Network or Cadre. This group will work with the community relations office in gathering news and information from their schools and in helping to disseminate key messages to staff. They can also assist in reporting rumors and emerging issues. These representatives are responsible for notifying the community relations office about important happenings at their schools (i.e., events, awards, student and staff accomplishments, special interest stories, etc.). Their job is to complete the news referral forms, or get others to fill them out, and send them in to the community relations office. Make sure they know where to find the form online as well. The PR Network representative should not be asked to write news stories or articles, but simply to gather all the pertinent information for further follow-up by the community relations office. This allows for the creation of a weekly news tip sheet (see next bullet) or, the community relations office can sort submissions into categories (i.e., for use in internal vs. external publications, or pitch to local media).

The best PR Network representatives in schools are people who know what is going on and have a nose for news – the library media specialist, an enthusiastic teacher, a guidance counselor or school secretary or clerk. The most important attribute is that they have a passion for their schools and want to help build a positive reputation. The communications office should provide training at the beginning of the year (favors or door prizes can be offered as an incentive), and hold a thank you reception or meeting at the end of the year.

- **Create a weekly news tip sheet** – Once news referral forms are submitted by the schools, a community relations office staff member takes the information and enters events and activities into a weekly news tip sheet, along with district events such as Board meetings, reorganization discussions, school holidays, etc. The sheet should be organized in chronological order by date and list the event, time, location, and contact name and number. If it is unclear by the name what the event or activity entails, also include a one or two line description. You can also include a link to the web site for more information (i.e., Board meeting agenda or special event program).

The tip sheet should cover a two-week calendar period. These are then sent out weekly to:

- Local news media
- Principals, PR Network reps, school secretaries
- Board members, administrators
- Key Communicator Network
- Posted to the web site

- Posted on Channel 22 bulletin board.

In addition to the weekly news tip sheet, some additional uses for the news referral forms submitted by the PR Network reps include:

- Congratulatory notes from the superintendent to staff or students who have received awards or special recognition.
- Recognition at Board meetings for significant awards or achievements.

This systematic method of communicating addresses a need expressed by some focus group participants to know “what’s happening in our schools.”

- **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 entire communication effort. We recommend that Robbinsdale Area Schools use school newsletters and web sites to reach parents with key messages and operational information about the district. This could include information about how the district is managing the budget to obtain the maximum benefit for students; the impact of budget cuts resulting from funding shortfalls; its progress toward goals and objectives; information on NCLB, policy/curriculum decisions and other Board action items; and updates on the reorganization process.

The community relations office could prepare and send short information summaries to the schools by e-mail that can be copied and included on web sites and in newsletters under a “District News” heading, making it easy for the schools and insuring message consistency across the district. Although web site users can link directly from school sites to the district site for information, by also including it on school sites, you increase the chance that the information will be read since the reader doesn’t have to change sites.

In order to push information out to non-parent community members, 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. This would provide taxpayers with a closer connection to the schools and help build stakeholder support at a grassroots level.

- **Conduct readership surveys of district and school newsletters –** The district and the schools should conduct readership surveys of newsletters. The primary focus of publications should be to deliver news and information about the local school 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.
- **Develop a key-contact management system –** Continue collecting and entering the names, addresses, fax numbers, e-mail addresses, etc., of key communicators and leaders in your community. Off-the-shelf data management software offers the ability to send

targeted e-mail messages to these leaders that will bolster communication with the school district. This list of key constituents, if sorted appropriately, can be of great value to all of the district's communication and other relationship-building efforts. Once working lists have been created, regular publications with targeted information can be e-mailed to each group.

## **Recommendation 6: Improve communication with employees.**

School districts in today's rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for achievement and student success. Districts seeking to implement change find that it occurs most quickly and efficiently when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. This is especially important with a district's internal audiences. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of the responsibility for this role. Employees who are informed and involved take greater pride in their job performance and function more effectively.

While many recommendations in this report include specific activities, there is a shift in behavior that is also recommended. The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts. We believe a strong emphasis should be placed on improving internal communications throughout the district. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to communicate about a decision or issue, it is essential that this communication process begin with staff. Staff members in the focus groups indicated they often feel "out of the loop" about decisions and unclear about the direction and vision for the district. They find it difficult to be effective ambassadors for the schools when they can't articulate how the district plans to meet goals. Administrators need to be guided by a "staff first" focus when communicating. Some strategies for improving communication with employees include:

- **Continue to expand and maximize the use of the employee Intranet and electronic communication** – The district has already taken a positive step forward by increasing electronic communication with employees. We recommend that the Robbinsdale Area Schools continue to expand its use of technology to communicate with employees on important issues and other topics of interest to staff.

Employee focus group participants indicated that *Direct Line* is recognized as a key source of information for staff, although some are still adjusting to the switch from a print publication to electronic. In order to build usage of this publication among staff members, regular readership surveys should be conducted to insure that it is delivering the information they want and need. These can easily be conducted online through a link in the publication or by a follow-up e-mail.

Electronic newsletters also allow the district to provide links to national and state reports or other sites for those interested in more in-depth information on specific topics. Special "Alert" editions could also be published as needed (i.e., on time-sensitive or crisis topics). In order for an electronic publication to provide timely information to staff,

others in the district need to assist in this effort by submitting information from their schools and departments to the community relations office.

In instances where employees do not have access to a computer, printed copies should be sent via inter-office mail for posting or distribution. Another option is to set up a computer kiosk in staff lounges (particularly in departments such as maintenance, grounds and transportation) for employee use. We recommend copies be provided in a PDF format as well. This will save paper and offer a more reader friendly publication format for those who are still printing it out when they receive it, as many in the focus groups indicated they do this.

We also recommend that regular evaluations be conducted of employee usage of the Intranet. As more information is made available in a user-friendly format, it should become the go-to information resource for staff. The key is to make access as simple as possible by limiting the number of “click throughs” to reach desired information.

- **Develop standards and expectations for staff communication** – While expectations exist for how teachers and staff should communicate with parents, expectations should also be established for how the district will communicate with employees. As frontline communicators, employees should receive important information *before* the media and public. Focus group participants indicated major sources of information were the *Sun Post Clips* and “word of mouth” via colleagues and parents. Robbinsdale Area Schools should not rely on the local newspaper to be a primary source of important information, particularly to employees. When staff members rely heavily on local media or word of mouth to get information, it hampers the district’s efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to important issues.

Principals and supervisors should clearly understand their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner and be accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. However, in order for these administrators to communicate effectively, they must be included in the communication loop and receive all critical information of importance to district operations. For example, when a school experienced a crisis situation this year, other principals were not notified initially and learned about the incident first from the media, limiting their ability to keep school constituents accurately informed. Board members should also be notified before seeing or reading of unplanned events through local media.

The district should stress the role of all employees as communicators and ambassadors for education, and support them in this effort by providing timely information, a clear, consistent message, and training when appropriate.

- **Involve staff in decisions that impact them** – Staff morale often hinges on whether staff members believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions need to be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is particularly important for central office administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in school facilities throughout the district. For

example, focus group participants noted that cooks were not consulted when the district remodeled school kitchens. Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance.

- **Continue 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 and supervisors should continue their efforts in this area, and 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.

Central office employees should not be overlooked because it is assumed they know what is going on. The superintendent or a designated administrator should schedule regular meetings with central office staff, either by department, or as a building, to update them on activities and issues around the district and provide opportunities for staff 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.

- **Maximize voice mail for communicating time-sensitive or critical issue messages** – The use of voice mail should be analyzed to determine how it could be used more effectively and efficiently. Depending on system capabilities, voice mail can be an excellent way to distribute important information or update all staff quickly on critical incidents via a broadcast function. It may also be appropriate to involve staff in developing response-time guidelines for returning voice mail messages.
- **Celebrate staff contributions and efforts** – In today’s busy world, it is easy to overlook the daily efforts of staff and forget to take the extra time to say “thank you.” Most educators shy away from formal recognitions, but the small day-to-day acknowledgments of employee efforts can make the difference between a motivated or disgruntled staff.

While the district should continue any formal recognition programs, principals, administrators and supervisors should also be encouraged to recognize staff members in a more informal way on a regular basis. Some suggestions include:

- Commending them for their initiative in a public setting;
- Sending notes of congratulations for work well done and copying those notes to their personnel files;
- Taking time to say a personal thank you.

We recommend the district, individual schools, and departments seek out ways to celebrate successes and express appreciation to staff for their efforts on behalf of students. This can also be a great opportunity to engage a diverse group of employees, certificated and classified, to brainstorm additional recognition and celebration activities.

## **Recommendation 7: Emphasize the role of employees as Ambassadors for Education.**

One excellent way to create employee “ambassadors” is to include a communication component as part of new employee orientation for all employees. This provides an opportunity to stress the importance of relaying accurate information and facts to the public; instill an understanding of the Robbinsdale culture, and also do some “myth busting” of employee and community perceptions of the district. Orientation should acquaint new employees with district culture and procedures and help them feel part of the team. Employees new to the area and school system may be unfamiliar with local customs and communication styles and this can help them feel more comfortable in the community.

Provide new employees with an orientation packet that includes general information about the district, its mission, goals and objectives; an employee handbook; tips on being an “ambassador for education”; and any required forms. 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 existing orientation program be reviewed to insure it supports the district’s communication efforts. Employees should receive a clear message that communication is an important part of their jobs and not just a function of the principal or central office.

An additional aspect of “ambassadorship” is the importance of customer service, from both an external and internal perspective. All employees, from the administration on down, need to clearly understand their roles in providing the services today’s education “customer” demands. In order to be effective in this important role, employees also need to feel empowered to make decisions related to meeting customer needs. Internally, staff members, particularly those who work at the central office level, need to understand how they support each other in their jobs, and how to meet the needs of their colleague “customers” in the schools.

We recommend that the community relations office offer customer service training for employees to ensure that they understand how it relates to their positions. This is an area where the district may be able to tap into training resources available via business partners such as the Chamber of Commerce or General Mills. Robbinsdale Area Schools is fortunate to have a variety of possible partners through its Community Education program and related activities.

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 your efforts. By providing staff with training in phone and e-mail etiquette, dealing with difficult

people and general communications, the district will give them tools to support their roles as ambassadors and customer service agents for the schools.

Reinforce employees' efforts by highlighting good ambassadorship and/or customer service on the web site or in publications, or by recognizing an "Ambassador of the Month" at Board meetings.

### **Recommendation 8: Implement a true Key Communicator Network.**

The community relations office has developed an e-mail list of key communicators who receive important information on a periodic basis. In addition, the district has implemented an e-news subscription link on the web site that allows the public and staff members to select which e-publications they would like to receive. While these options provide an effective vehicle for delivering general information to Robbinsdale Area Schools' stakeholders, this type of electronic "key communicator" list should not be viewed as interchangeable with a traditional opinion leaders network.

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 group of influential community/staff opinion leaders. We recommend that Robbinsdale Area Schools implement a true Key Communicator Network of supportive individuals with a demonstrated ability to influence others in the community.

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 business leaders who participated in the Principal for a Day program are representative of some of the people who should be invited. The group should be a manageable size to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship building.

The superintendent and other district leaders should meet with these opinion leaders several times a year along with sending them news updates and other important information about the district and schools. We recommend the community relations office develop an e-publication specifically for key communicators that keeps them informed on issues, the rationale behind decisions, and key messages the district wants to disseminate. While offering people a choice of e-publications is a positive customer service component, it limits the district's ability to get critical messages to key individuals in a timely, consistent manner, as it is likely they often "don't know what they don't know."

A news update specifically for key communicators would also allow the district to alert them on breaking news or crisis situations. What makes this type of group effective is that they are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents; they are perceived as having access to "inside" information; and they are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. Key communicators should also be given a "hot line" number to call if they need information or an erroneous statement or rumor needs correcting.

Robbinsdale Area Schools should continue its e-subscription options and encourage citizens to join the mailing list. A Key Communicator Network would expand this to provide opportunities for two-way communication with influential community and staff leaders that could be very beneficial to the district. This group can be used as a sounding board to test new ideas; a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents; and an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

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

## **Recommendation 9: Expand opportunities for parent/community communication.**

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 tend to receive their information through people they know – employees, parents and students; *School Performances*; the web site (particularly the *Parent Portal*); and the *Sun Post*.

All focus groups were familiar with *School Performances*, and it is perceived as a fairly reliable source of information. Some suggested it should be shorter and more attention grabbing to entice those without children in schools to read it when it arrives in their mailbox. Timeliness is an issue with printed publications, but *School Performances* has an established track record as a communication vehicle in Robbinsdale Area Schools. To maintain and enhance its effectiveness, annual readership surveys should be conducted to insure the district continues to deliver the information stakeholders want. Keep articles short and send readers to the district web site for additional information by incorporating links into the stories. This will help build use of the web site as a resource for current updates and more in-depth information.

We believe the district should continue publishing *Update* as an electronic news piece. Keep the focus on “big picture” issues such as progress on goals and objectives, the reorganization plan, upcoming referendum, budget and finances, legislative agendas, NCLB and student achievement. Build readership beyond those who sign-up on the web site by sending it to the Key Communicator Network, parent council members, elected officials and other community and business leaders. Strive to publish it on a regular monthly schedule so that readers begin to anticipate receiving a new issue.

Robbinsdale Area Schools has been working to improve the content on its web site, and focus group participants noted this. It is important that the web site stay fresh and dynamic in order to build its value as the “go-to” resource for information. Middle and high school parents praised the *Parent Portal* that allows them online access to student grades, classroom plans, etc. Such real-time access creates an immediate atmosphere of transparency for teachers and schools, with parents often reporting that they feel “on top of” issues and connected to their children’s teachers and schools. And, such access to information also helps to build an atmosphere of

accountability, for both school employees and parents, that makes it easier to identify areas of concern before they grow into major problems. We note the district has already changed to a new provider, *Infinite Campus*, as it continues to expand and improve this service.

One of the benefits of technology is that once established, it is one of the quickest modes of communication available. Staff, parents, and community members crave timely information. Effective use of technology can deliver it. Some districts are using their web sites to provide virtual tours of buildings, interactive attendance boundary and transportation information based on input addresses, complete financial information in searchable databases and so on. The web site is also a good place to dispel rumors via an FAQ section located in a prominent site on the home page. Our recommendation is to look for ways to have as much information as possible available in some e-format to work synergistically with other communication programming for maximum impact.

The non-parent population in most school districts today constitutes a majority of the community, so it is vital that Robbinsdale Area Schools also develop communication strategies for reaching this group. Additional suggestions for expanding communication with the public include:

- **Provide news inserts for business/community publications** – Most organizations that publish regular newsletters are always seeking interesting information as filler. The community relations office could prepare short news updates about the schools and district that businesses and civic groups can use in their employee and member newsletters.
- **Implement a “speakers’ bureau” that community organizations and businesses can tap for meetings and conferences** – A speakers’ bureau would provide the district with an opportunity to directly communicate programs and initiatives to key civic and community groups and patrons. Identify various administrators and employees (such as Teachers of the Year) who are available for speaking engagements on a variety of topics. Prepared PowerPoint presentations and videos will make this effort professional. This service could also be offered online for easy access and booking. A speakers’ bureau would allow the district to take its message to the public rather than always bringing the public to the district.
- **Continue the Principal for a Day program** – One of the most effective ways of demonstrating the quality of the educational program is to let people see it in action. The district’s Principal for a Day program this past spring was positively received by all who participated. We encourage the district to continue this program and to seek out ways to expand opportunities and build continuing relationships with business and community participants. Another consideration is to videotape participants during their day along with follow-up comments that could be used as a marketing piece on the district. Some districts hold a breakfast the next day to thank participants and share thoughts on their experiences.

- **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 useful personal technology skills (i.e., online photo scrapbooks, Photo Shop, creating family web sites, etc.).
  - Have students publish a newsletter for seniors containing articles on teaching and learning in today’s schools.
  - Include representatives from the senior community in the Key Communicator Network.
  - Include seniors on future finance election committees.
  - Allow senior volunteers to join students for breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria.
  - Urge schools to send performing groups to senior centers.
  - Allow senior residents to attend school concerts, performances for free with advanced reservations by calling the school.
  - 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.
  
- **Expand tutoring/mentoring programs to connect patrons and students** – Research indicates that students who have direct, regular contact with a caring adult do better in school. Today’s volunteers are seeking meaningful involvement in education and are willing to donate their time if they feel their efforts have purpose and value. In addition to senior citizen volunteers, many businesses will allow employees release time each week for tutoring. With the growing student diversity in Robbinsdale communities, tutoring and mentoring programs also provide an opportunity to involve more men and minorities as role models for children. Businesses become involved when they clearly understand school goals (i.e., improve reading/attendance) and how they help fill a need. An opportunity also exists to develop an internal mentoring program by involving interested support staff members in a direct role with students.
  
- **Initiate regular communication with area 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. Consider inviting clergy members to breakfast, at least annually, to meet with the superintendent and several Board members and to share information about the schools.

- **Involve students in your communication efforts** – Due to the variety of resources available to today’s students through technology, they are often interested in tying their learning activities to real world experiences and learning from members of the community. This offers an 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 10: Improve communication with minority populations.**

The increasingly diverse make-up of the communities served by Robbinsdale Area Schools will require it to continue to seek new and different ways to develop genuine two-way communication with its families and patrons. Focus group participants consistently noted that this is a growing need. A variety of communication vehicles will be needed in order to reach this important audience. Traditional publications may be ineffective in reaching non-English speaking and immigrant populations and the district should research the best ways to communicate with the different minority groups it serves. Some strategies for connecting to minority stakeholders include:

- **Create a minority opinion leader network** – Talk to employees involved in community-based programs, faith and business leaders, community groups and organizations, nearby colleges, and government agencies to identify people who are recognized as active, involved members of minority communities. Consider having each school with a high or expanding minority population also identify parents to represent the school. Use this network to advise the district on effective ways to reach minority constituents and to respond to projects and programs under development. Provide the group with information on any specific services offered for non-English speaking students as well as a way to have their questions answered throughout the year. Representatives from the minority opinion leader network should also be included in the Key Communicator Network (see Recommendation 8).
- **Increase efforts to translate informational materials for non-English speaking parents** – As the district’s demographics change, it will need to address this growing need. While it is unrealistic to translate all materials into multiple languages, the phrase “This document is important. Please have someone translate it for you” can be translated into a variety of languages. This reference sheet can be attached to school documents and serve to signal non-English speaking parents that they need to find someone to help them with the information.
- **Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families** – Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable, such as church or home.

Communicating face-to-face with parents in their primary language in their homes builds strong connections to the schools. Some districts have bilingual liaisons that work directly in the neighborhoods with families. The district should conduct research to determine whether this type of outreach is needed in some of its neighborhoods.

- **Build partnerships with ethnic agencies** – A strong relationship between the school system and community agencies that serve specific ethnic groups will allow Robbinsdale Area Schools to benefit from their advice and expertise and help provide an entree to these communities. We suggest the district consider bringing these agencies in several times a year to consult on new initiatives and projects that impact their communities.
- **Use any ethnic media outlets in the region to provide information about the district** – Foreign language cable television programs, radio stations, newspapers and web sites (if available) should be included in all media and marketing plans for the district.
- **Provide visual signs of welcome and an appreciation of diversity at schools** – Something as simple as a poster that says “welcome” in many different languages can make a positive first impression. Displays that highlight an appreciation of different cultures also add to creating an inclusive climate.
- **Provide diversity training for staff** – Diversity training for staff should be developed to build understanding and sensitivity to cultural concerns. You may be able to tap into the business community or local social service agencies for assistance in this area.
- **Evaluate staffing and service hours at the Welcome Center** – The district has a Welcome Center for new non-English speaking families. Focus group participants indicated that at times the center is not open and accessible when families need services. We recommend evaluating the schedule for the center in order to coordinate it with high use times during the school year (i.e., start of semester). It may be possible to offer some services at alternate sites during specific times of the year in order to broaden use and accessibility.

The translation line should also be reviewed, as some school secretaries indicated they sometimes have difficulty accessing it in a timely manner.

## **Recommendation 11: Develop guidelines for e-mail and voice mail.**

With the advent of voice mail and e-mail, parents and community members have much greater access to teachers and other school personnel. While this is positive and increases opportunities to communicate, it is also important to set reasonable timelines for responding to requests and inquiries. We suggest the district and/or each school create a committee of parents and staff to develop a set of guidelines for voice and e-mail communications. These should address response times (i.e., all calls will be returned within 48 business hours) and expectations for the use of these communication tools, such as what constitutes unreasonable demands of a teacher or principal’s time or what communications are not acceptable by e-mail (such as an

excused absence note that must be signed). It is also helpful to offer staff guidance or training on how to handle the few but time-consuming, “e-mail addicted” constituents who might constantly reply to e-mails with additional complaints or attempts to continue online debates. Such policies or guidelines, once developed, should also be included in student handbooks and on the web site.

Specific guidelines should be set and expectations for all employees outlined in order to maximize the effectiveness of any online e-communication tools. Of course, as performance expectations are established, appropriate training and support for all employees in the use of technology and importantly – how to effectively communicate through it – should be developed and implemented. Finally, adding e-communication programming makes it vital for the district to carefully assess available access to technology for all employees. And, at a minimum, employees who lack regular access should be kept apprised of options and offered alternatives for accessing information.

## **Recommendation 12: Conduct communications training for staff.**

The auditors identified a need for some communication inservice training, and principals also indicated on the *Communication Checklist* that they are interested in some support in this area as well. We recommend the district consider offering training for staff in the following areas:

- **Developing school and classroom communication/PR plans** – A number of principals indicated on the *Checklist* that they would welcome assistance in developing communication/PR plans for their schools. Individual classroom plans can also be developed that support the schools’ and district’s communication goals (i.e., update *Parent Portal* information, send out monthly classroom newsletters, write five notes a week to parents, invite community members to visit the class). We recommend that a component of the district’s comprehensive communications plan include the development of school plans that tie directly to it.
- **Continue to offer training support for creating school newsletters and web sites** – Compared to many school systems, the district’s individual schools have web sites that are fairly consistent in presenting information and easy to navigate. Some are more complete and up-to-date than others however. The school newsletters reviewed by the auditors presented useful content and were nicely designed graphically. Principals should be encouraged to include links to the district web site in school newsletter articles to help drive readers to the site for more information about districtwide initiatives and plans.

We recommend that the district continue to provide ongoing support and training for principals, their staff, or volunteers on the basic graphics and content needs for school newsletters and web sites. Principals and other administrators may also benefit from a workshop on how to write concise, effective letters or messages. Businesses equate clear, concise communication to productivity and often offer such workshops or training for supervisory staff members. Such training could also include an introduction to the

district's communications plan and key messages for the year, with suggestions of ways in which these messages could be worked into school-based communication efforts.

The *Parent Portal* features of the web site were very popular with parent focus groups, so it is important that staff members receive regular inservice in keeping these important information tools up-to-date as well as training in how to use the new service, *Infinite Campus*.

- **Offer media training** – We recommend that administrators receive regular training in media relations. This should include skills training in delivering an effective message in an interview or during a crisis. Offering basic media contact training for administrators and staff on what constitutes a news story and how to write a news release or media alert for a special event can also help the district to tell its story to the public.
- **Review what works for parent-teacher conferences, open houses and other community meeting venues** – Parent-teacher conferences, open houses and other events that bring school and community members together are more often than not critical first impression opportunities for good “ambassadorship.” Inservice programs for teachers on how to conduct an effective conference and prepare an open house presentation can have a major impact on parents’ perceptions of the quality of the school.

### **Recommendation 13: Continue public engagement efforts and refine the process.**

The concepts of “public engagement” and “transparency” are compelling for education because they require us to engage our stakeholders in meaningful ways that create a civic investment in our schools. However, public engagement is only successful when the process involves stakeholders in all phases of decision-making, from start to finish, and this requires a timeline that allows for real dialogue and shared ownership of outcomes.

Robbinsdale Area Schools initiated an engagement process around its reorganization plan this past year. While focus group participants appreciated the opportunity to provide input, there was an overwhelming perception among the groups that public input was not truly considered and that decisions had already been made. All agreed that the facilitation process and format did not work well and needs improvement if the district plans a similar activity in the future.

We encourage the district not to abandon public engagement strategies, but to evaluate what worked and what didn't in order to refine the process so that it works more effectively in the future. We believe it is important to include a public engagement component as part of the overall communications plan in order to sustain and strengthen the district's connection to the community.

It is difficult to conduct a large-scale engagement project on a topic such as reorganization of school boundaries, because this particular issue tends to generate an emotional response from those directly impacted by the proposed changes. It may be helpful in the future to

begin with smaller discussions groups, such as study circles, to initiate conversations around challenges facing the district.

Study circles are facilitated groups that involve 10-25 people. Discussions on a particular topic may take place over a period of several weeks. They provide an opportunity to surface all sides of an issue as well as some underlying concerns that may have an impact on the outcome. NSPRA can provide more information on coordinating study circles.

Some additional strategies to consider include:

- **Hold “town halls” or forums in different regions of the district** – The topic could be one affecting schools district-wide, or one pertinent to a specific community served by the district. Town halls and forums are not public hearings, but rather, should be carefully structured to provide an opportunity for community members to participate in a dialogue with district leaders — to listen, speak, and more importantly, to be listened to. They are not designed to be confrontational but to create an environment that allows for civil discourse. Similar forums can also be held on a smaller scale at individual schools.
- **Provide opportunities for the public to have input that don’t require attendance at a meeting** – Offer a section on the district web site that allows constituents to record their comments or reactions to a specific question, issue or proposal before the Board. Provide “communicards” at Board meetings and in schools that ask a specific question about an issue the district is dealing with that patrons can write a response on and return.
- **Continue to develop collaborative partnerships with city/county agencies** – Collaboration is key to creating a district community that actively supports families and offers a lifestyle people will seek out. Partnerships with agencies and foundations that can provide services such as medical/dental care, behavioral health, and other special areas can help meet the needs of children and families who fall through the gaps of insurance and other state and federal means of support. Another kind of collaboration that can be very beneficial is building working relationships with law enforcement, fire and other emergency services to develop comprehensive crisis plans.
- **Continue the Board Listening Hour and keep a balanced approach to decision-making** – Focus group feedback indicated that while participants feel opportunities are offered for input, they are less certain their voices are actually heard. The Board may want to review its decision-making process to address this concern. We encourage the Board to use its Listening Hour to open dialogue with stakeholders at the beginning of the decision-making process around a specific issue, and not just at the end prior to making a decision. The Listening Hour also needs to be promoted better, as many focus group participants were not familiar with it or were uncertain of its purpose.

The Board will never be able to please everyone, but the decision-making process needs to be balanced and take into account all points of view on what’s best for all children and schools in the community. The Board should continue to seek community input through

public engagement strategies that provide insight on how the community feels about key upcoming issues.

What is critical to the success of any public engagement strategy is the Board and administration's commitment to listening to input and recommendations, and taking action based on all the information at their disposal. While this does not mean every recommendation made by a citizen or staff committee will be implemented, it does mean that input will be considered in the context of how it furthers the district's mission, goals and objectives. Special programs and events should be evaluated regularly to insure they are having the desired impact.

### **Recommendation 14: Strengthen the commitment to visible leadership.**

Building trust in district leadership should continue to be a priority, both internally and externally. By opening up communication about the decision-making process — on the budget, policies, goals and objectives, achievement, and reorganization — the Board and administration can continue to develop a “transparent” style of leadership that allows stakeholders to monitor and participate in the educational process. This will not only help to foster trust and credibility in the district, but also encourage all stakeholders to assume responsibility for the success of their schools. Some strategies to continue this effort include:

- **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 community relations office.

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

- **Publish an action report after each Board meeting** – Board meeting minutes are posted on the web site, but this does not provide for an immediate update on actions taken by the Board. We strongly recommend that the community relations office begin posting an action report immediately following each Board meeting – preferably the next day – that informs stakeholders of any decisions that have been acted upon and what it means for those impacted. These reports can be short, but they provide another way of demonstrating transparency and accountability to the public by insuring information is available in a timely manner.

- **Administrators and Board members should visit schools as much as possible** – While this is time-consuming, employees appreciate any efforts by district leaders to spend time in classrooms and lunchrooms, and it can bring long-term benefits as well. These visits should be scheduled in addition to those involving business or problem-solving. Efforts also should be made to visit transportation, food service and maintenance support staff. If it is difficult for Board members to visit schools because of work commitments, they may be able to accomplish the same goal by attending extracurricular evening activities. We recommend that all visits be reported on in some fashion as a follow-up. For example, the superintendent, administrators and Board members could report on visits or attendance at special events as a regular part of the Board meeting agenda. Other avenues include adding brief notes in school and district publications or web sites and sharing impressions at staff meetings. Not only does this raise the visibility of school leaders, it also gives them “bragging rights” about the district, which builds pride and staff morale.
- **Brown Bag Forums** – Consider scheduling regular coffees or “brown bag” lunch forums where administrators or Board members can meet with staff in an informal setting to listen to ideas and concerns, share progress reports and discuss issues and initiatives. These forums should be held in the schools. Visits should be planned in advance so that staff members who wish to talk with administrators will know when and where to find them. This same concept could be applied to offering forums for parents.
- **Listening Lunches (or coffees)** – Another variation of the brown bag forum is for the superintendent, administrators and Board members to establish a monthly opportunity for community members to drop by for informal conversation and to ask questions about the school system. Consider teaming up with local coffee shops or restaurants in different regions of the district to host the event. Set a regular time and day (i.e., every second Tuesday from 7:00 – 9:00 a.m.). Board members and administrators could rotate attendance. Topics could also be specified – for example, one date might focus on special education, another on the budget or state legislative issues, etc. The key is to meet with community members on their turf to listen to concerns.
- **Substitute for a Day** – Having central office administrators substitute teach in the schools periodically can also build goodwill. Such an effort is appreciated by the teaching staff and demonstrates that administrators are still focused on kids. Occasionally, it can also result in positive coverage in the news media.
- **Leadership and visibility in community activities is also an important component of “visible leadership”** – 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. Superintendent Stan Mack and Executive Director of Community Education Bob Wittman were noted by focus group participants for their active involvement in community organizations. We encourage other district leaders to expand their activities in this way as well.

## **Recommendation 15: Consider creating a Business Advisory Council.**

Robbinsdale Area Schools has a good working relationship with the cities it serves, and Mr. Mack and other administrators have established relationships with business leaders through their participation in various community/civic groups. The district also has an active business partnership group and the Seven Dreams Foundation. We recommend the district consider establishing a Superintendent's Business Advisory Council as well. Members would be invited to meet with the superintendent several times a year to discuss management and resource challenges facing the district. This could be particularly valuable for Robbinsdale Area Schools in light of changing demographics and moderately declining enrollment projections.

Some districts have used business advisory councils to examine the business side of district operations and make recommendations for improvements. Others have had business representatives train school employees in management and "customer service" techniques. Robbinsdale Area Schools is fortunate to have some business partners who might be particularly helpful in this area.

In many cases, business representatives are impressed with how good the school district's practices are, and they are willing to relay that to skeptical citizens, the news media and other opinion leaders in the community. This group could also serve as key communicators to the business community.

## **Recommendation 16: Evaluate the use of video and cable television channels as communication vehicles.**

In initial discussions with community relations office staff, some concern was expressed that one full-time position for video production has been left vacant. In our focus groups, we found that although participants were aware of cable Channel 22, cable television was not seen as a preferred method of communication in the community since many did not have cable access. Those who did primarily noted that they watched the Board meetings if, as one participant said, "Something wild is going on." *School Notes* was not mentioned as a major news source, and some participants said they do not watch the streaming video on the web site either.

Our professional estimation is that it will take a great deal of time, money, and additional staff to increase cable TV's impact for Robbinsdale Area Schools. We recommend the community relations office investigate alternative ways to deliver video communication. Some possibilities to consider include:

- Talk to cable channels 12 and 22, public radio, and TV stations in the local viewing area about the possibility of partnerships or joint program opportunities. Some districts have developed partnerships with local cable channels that provide them with short interview shows taped monthly at the studio. These are aired repeatedly during local cable time on the Headline News Network, expanding viewership beyond the local educational channel. In some markets, TV stations and school districts have partnered (often through the public education foundation) to provide public service ads for the school district, paid for

by business partners. The TV station produces and sells the ads, but the school district maintains editorial control of content. This is an excellent marketing opportunity for the school district to the greater community.

- Use purchased services for specific video projects, rather than investing in a staff position. Build a cadre of freelance consultants with television and video experience who can be contracted with on an as-needed basis. The district already has equipment and one staff member with expertise in this area. When additional expertise is required, extra help can be contracted for, in either a support role or to deliver a specific project (i.e., bond referendum video).
- Use students where possible. It may be possible to develop high school intern programs that would allow students to assist the district's half-time video specialist as grips, to manage equipment, etc. Also, you may consider using high school students or teachers as talent to serve as anchors for short vignette shows about schools. This is a great way to highlight students, fine arts program, and school success.
- Review the recognition portion of Board meetings to determine if it is possible to increase the production value – then air that portion of the Board meeting multiple times on Channel 22.

## **Recommendation 17: Consider creating a Communications Advisory Council**

A communications advisory council can serve as a resource team to the community relations office, providing input and helping to gather feedback related to the implementation of the strategic communications plan. Some districts have also used this type of council to monitor and report to the public on the progress of the plan. An effective communications advisory council should include representatives from the district's various target audiences – internal and external. Their primary role should be to assist in scanning for emerging communication issues; providing insight into the best way to reach target audiences; helping to frame key messages from a public perspective; providing input on the effectiveness of communication/marketing efforts; and making suggestions for improvements.

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

The recommendations provided in this report are extensive and comprehensive and should be prioritized by need and importance as to how the district's communication resources are expended.

Our recommendation for filling the current vacancy in the community relations office is to seek a public relations generalist to assist the communications director, rather than hiring a video specialist. This position should provide support for the director in writing, editing, day to

day media relations and web site content management. Graphic design skills as well as some experience in marketing would be a plus.

At this time, the communications director spends a large portion of his time on routine media contacts and publication preparation. This leaves him little time to work with the executive director of community education/community relations to develop more strategic communication programs and activities. A majority of these tasks could be handled by a PR generalist under his direction. We strongly recommend that tasks and responsibilities be reorganized and prioritized to allow the director to work directly with schools and departments in developing targeted communications that support the district's goals. The communications director's focus should be on 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 community relations staff.

Another option to consider is the use of more contract services for routine communication projects such as newsletters, annual reports, marketing materials, and special project planning facilitation.

As more of the district's communication efforts involve the use of technology, the quality of electronic communication – from web site design to e-mail or online newsletters – would benefit greatly by adding a specialist in this area. This position could be responsible for writing and producing electronic newsletters for staff and other targeted audiences as well as assisting with the production of print publications. Responsibilities could also include managing the district web site, and assisting schools with their web sites. Web sites and electronic communication vehicles are no longer “nice to have” extras in a school systems' communication tool kit – they are now essential components of the overall communication and marketing effort and directly impact the public's image of the school system. This should be a consideration for long-range planning related to staffing in the community relations office.

These staffing recommendations would allow the communications director to spend more of his time on critical strategic communication and engagement activities that address the needs of Robbinsdale Area Schools increasingly diverse and growing communities and allow for continued proactive communication. Budget allocations for the community relations office should be evaluated annually to insure program effectiveness and responsiveness.



---

## **Appendix**

- Focus Group Discussion Outline
- What is NSPRA?
- Auditors' Vitas



**NSPRA Communication Audit**  
**Robbinsdale Area School District**  
**Focus Group Discussion Questions**

1. What are the strengths of the Robbinsdale Area School District?
  - a. Are there areas that need improvement in either the district or the schools?
2. How would you describe the district's current image in the community?
3. Where do you get most of your information about the schools and the district?
  - a. Of these sources of information, which or who are the most credible?
  - b. (*group specific- internal or external*) I have some district publications here. Have you seen them?
  - c. Which are most helpful and informative? How can they be improved?
  - d. Have you visited the district's web site? Is it helpful and informative? How could it be improved?
  - e. Have you seen any of the district's programs on your local cable access channel? Are these programs valuable? How can they be improved?
4. (*For parents/community*) Do you feel that you receive the information you need about the schools?
  - a. What information would you like to receive?
  - b. What is the best way for the district/schools to communicate with you?

(*For staff*) As an employee, is the information you need to do your job communicated in a timely manner?

  - a. What information would you like to receive?
  - b. How do you prefer to receive your information?
5. One of the district's goals is to engage parents and the public in ongoing dialogue about the priorities and plans of the district. Do you feel you have opportunities to provide input and express your views?
  - a. If not, how can the district best provide those opportunities?
  - b. Did you participate in the district reorganization meetings held for the public last year?
    - If so, did you find the process valuable? Why?
    - How could the process be improved in the future?
- (*For staff*) As an employee, do you feel you have the opportunity to provide input and express your views about major district initiatives, such as reorganization?
  - a. What is the most effective way to gather input from employees?
  - b. Did you find the reorganization process valuable? How could it be improved in the future?
6. What is the greatest challenge facing the district? What does it need to be sure to communicate with the public about?



## *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 almost 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 35 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 anywhere, is held each July. This four-day session offers more than 70 topics on a wide array of school communication issues. The July 2006 Seminar will be held in Chicago, Illinois.

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 communication 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.

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.nspira.org](http://www.nspira.org).



## **Karen H. Kleinz, APR**

Karen H. Kleinz, APR, associate executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has over 20 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, Karen has represented the association in a partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform to promote public engagement strategies designed to help educators develop effective relationships with parents and community. 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.

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.

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.

NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication, and it has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States and Canada since 1935.



## **Judith B. Davis, APR**

During a 20-year career in educational public relations, Judith B. Davis, APR, has won numerous awards, including the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Gold Medallion Award, the highest honor given by NSPRA. She has won more than 25 awards for publications she wrote and created. She developed successful communications plans for two multi-million dollar bond referendums that passed by 83 and 87 percent majority votes in her community. She helped develop an award-winning campaign that featured extensive community involvement in solving overcrowding in Chesterfield County Public Schools, a 56,000-student school district in central Virginia.

Judy completed a three-year term on the National School Public Relations Association Executive Board in 2004, serving as Mideast Vice President representing seven states in the region. She served on the NSPRA Accreditation Committee, conducting oral interviews and helping develop examinations for those seeking to be accredited in public relations. She helped revitalize the Chesapeake Chapter of NSPRA, which won a Blue Ribbon Award during her tenure as president of the chapter.

She recently served as a judge for two national teacher recognition programs, the Butler-Cooley Excellence in Teaching Awards and the National Teacher Hall of Fame. She was the keynote speaker for a conference for school support staff members in Chesterfield County this year, focusing on customer service and excellence. She has also served as a trainer in crisis management, media relations and writing workshops, and has provided training for current and perspective principals on all aspects of public relations and image building through a Principal Preparation Program.

She has written articles and prepared tip sheets and scenarios for NSPRA, and also led roundtable presentations on some of the award-winning programs in Chesterfield County Public Schools. A recent issue of NSPRA's *Counselor* featured an article on the accountability program in CCPS that includes a survey of principals asking them to anonymously rate the services they receive from central departments. The Community Relations Department has consistently been one of the highest rated and most valued departments in the school division since the survey began five years ago.

A graduate of the University of Richmond, Judy began her career in 1967 as a reporter for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, where she covered religion, education and local government issues. She took a 14-year hiatus in her career to rear three children. During that time she was active in the local, county and state PTA, serving on the executive board of the Virginia PTA as publicity chairman. She also served on the Virginia Board of Education Advisory Committee for Schools for the Deaf and Blind. She served as director of communications for the Virginia Travel Council before joining Chesterfield County Public Schools.