



**A Comprehensive
Communications Plan
for Aledo Independent
School District**

**Part 1
A Communications Audit**

Completed
November 4, 2015



November 4, 2015

Dr. Derek Citty, Ed. D. Superintendent
Aledo Independent School District
1008 Bailey Ranch Road
Aledo, TX 76008

RE: Communications Services, Phase One

Dear Dr. Citty:

Enclosed is Phase One, the Communications Audit, which Pavlik and Associates has conducted over late summer and early fall as part of the overall communications services and consulting program for which we have been engaged.

In order to develop an overarching and strategic communications plan for Aledo Independent School District, Pavlik has conducted a comprehensive audit of newsletters, brochures, advertisements, news releases, published news accounts, formal inquiries about School District services/activities and the District's response, and other materials which the District has provided. **Communications audits are a measurable, consistent assessment of an organization's complete communications function.** By going through this process, Pavlik has identified the strengths and opportunities as well as deficiencies in the District's communications process. This analysis serves to strengthen the district's communications program by promoting measurable processes, outcomes, and, ultimately, consistency.

By understanding the District's current communication patterns, Pavlik has evaluated the **effectiveness** of what has been done. This approach allows Pavlik to provide Aledo ISD with a pertinent communications plan that will not only be **useful** but also **attainable**.

Going forward, in Phase Two, we will use insights gleaned from the audit to develop a strategic communications plan that includes a variety of public relations functions and activities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Pavlik". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Linda Pavlik
President

Pavlik and Associates (Pavlik) was retained by Aledo Independent School District (Aledo ISD) to conduct an extensive, comprehensive communications audit that will be the basis for a strategic communications plan. The task was divided into three phases.



Phase I

Pavlik requested access to all communications materials and activities produced over three years, either in digital or hard copy format when available. Because Aledo ISD communicates digitally most often, all materials were provided to Pavlik in that format. One piece of print media, a paid advertisement, was provided in PDF format. Materials provided include:

- One paid advertisement
- A list of news releases
- Sample news releases
- An emergency procedure letter
- A strategic plan
- A parent climate survey
- Other printed materials – a bond election flyer and several newsletters

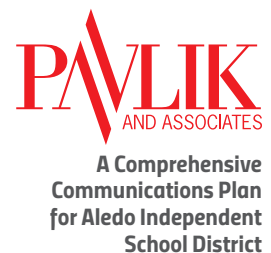
Additional materials examined included websites, social media, and smartphone communications.

Phase II

Pavlik examined materials to understand how communications were perceived and experienced by audiences (first hand) as well as looked at their relationships in the broader communications agenda. An evaluation form was used to evaluate not only the stand-alone effectiveness of the communications piece, but also the effectiveness of the entire communications body as a whole. Samples of these forms are in the attached Appendix.

Phase III

Pavlik composed the following narrative with general observations and summaries of the communications materials. A summary of the review findings are in the last section of this document.



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Best practices in the public relations profession are applied in the review and analysis of the effectiveness of a public relations/communications program. The following are applicable references that frame this discussion of the Aledo ISD brand, communications process, and message delivery and management.



What is Public Relations?

The definition of public relations continues to evolve. Terms which may be used interchangeably include communications, media relations, community relations, marketing, advertising, and promotions. For the purpose of this communications audit, terminology, scoping, explanations, and best practices are discussed below.

In 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) through its membership worldwide modernized the definition of public relations (PR), producing the following description:

“Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”¹

This straightforward definition focuses on the basic concept of PR – as a communication process, one that is strategic in nature and emphasizing “mutually beneficial relationships.” It is stated simply. As explained on the professional association’s website, www.prsa.org, key components of PR today are amplified.

- “Process” is preferable to “management function,” which can evoke ideas of control and top-down, one-way communications.
- “Relationships” relate to public relations’ role in helping to bring together organizations and individuals with key stakeholders.
- “Publics” can be synonymous with audiences and stakeholders.



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¹ <https://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/publicrelationsdefined/#.ViZQsH6rTcs>



As a **higher-level, management function**, PR also encompasses the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact, positive or negative, the operations and plans of the organization.
- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities.
- Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims.

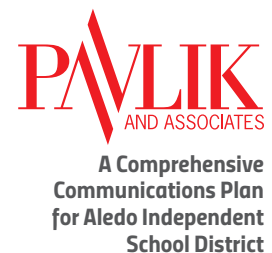
Integrity and ethics are paramount in the PR process, especially when the benefitting organization is a tax-supported entity. Aledo ISD's public relations, that encompasses external and internal communications, must be steeped in the principles and best practices for transparency, accountability, and service.

Based on discussions with the District's administration and a comprehensive review of the processes and tools which the District uses to communicate, **Pavlik finds Aledo ISD to be earnest and committed in its communications at all levels, internally to parents to students to taxpayers to its greater community.**

Parents

During this communication audit, Pavlik studied professional journals (both public relations and academic) and has systematically applied "best practices."

For example, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) in 2011 conducted a communications survey that resulted in 43,410 responses from 50 districts in 23 states as part of a communications accountability program. According to its findings as published by NSPRA, parents want more (rather than less) information about their child's progress in school on a regular basis and definitely want to know if their child is struggling before it is too late to do something about it. They prefer to have it delivered to them in electronic/internet based sources like email, e-newsletters, district websites, and parent portals.²



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²<https://www.nspr.org/files/docs/Release%20on%20CAP%20Survey.pdf>

Employees

Research supports the idea that communications accountability starts at the top and sets the standard of communication excellence for all employees throughout a school system.

NSPRA interviews with AASA Superintendents of the Year winners and finalists document that communication skills, and the direct links with leadership and vision, are at the top of the skill sets for successful superintendents.

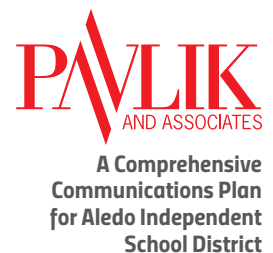


“The school PR professional is the one single individual in the school district who is uniquely positioned to influence key decision makers to consider the points of view of all key constituent groups, internally, and externally....It is critical to the credibility and effectiveness of the Superintendent and Board. It frequently requires telling them what they need to know and what they want to know. The PR professional is in essence the social conscience that every educational institution needs to survive in today’s marketplace.”³

- *Jacqueline Price, NSPRA past president and retired assistant superintendent, Capistrano CA Unified School District.*

“In public education, we need all the support we can get from parents, community and business leaders, elected officials, and others. We build that support through strong communications, by involving everyone in the process and keeping our eyes on the mission at hand – preparing students for the world ahead.”⁴

- *Jerry Weast, veteran school superintendent (retired), Montgomery County Public Schools, Why School Communication Matters*



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³<http://www.nspra.org/cap>

⁴<http://www.nspra.org/cap>

Marketing of Public School Districts

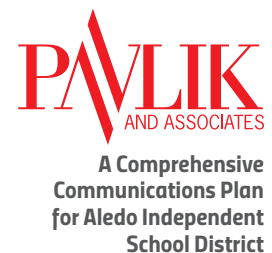


In past decades, public school districts were adamantly opposed to “marketing” because it was believed that PR programs were “hype” designed to “cover up” or “mask” problems and/or “mediocrity.” Today solid public relations programs are synonymous with transparency. “During the Baby Boom, educators had one constituency to court: parents,” writes Dorie Clark, in her article, “Why Public Schools Are Finally Getting Savvy About Marketing,” published April 27, 2015 in *Forbes*. With half the homes in many communities having school-age children, the need to fund public schools was obvious. Now, it’s not unusual for many districts to have less than 30 percent of its households with children in public schools. “Losing their core parental constituency has forced school boards and administrators to embrace social media and move beyond traditional newsletters to explain their value to the broader community,” says Clark, who is a marketing strategist who teaches at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business.⁵

The result is a new trend, public schools are finally embracing modern marketing strategies. “The realization of its importance often begins with superintendents, who are on the front lines of fighting for school budgets and liaising with skeptical community members,” the *Forbes* article continues. Additionally, teachers who have historically resisted marketing efforts are engaging, and teacher organizations understand that PR is important to assure student enrollment.

Rather than being seen as an extravagance, polling has increasingly become a way for school districts to engage and ensure they are heard. The resulting feedback can be invaluable for understanding community sentiment and which messages will resonate with which audiences, as a 30-year-old mother is likely to view education differently than a 65-year-old retiree.

Competition for students—and the taxpayer dollars they bring—is likely to increase in the future. Savvy school districts are increasingly realizing that if they want to retain and grow market share, they need to borrow marketing techniques from the corporations that have been fighting these battles for years, Clark concludes.



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⁵<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorieclark/2015/04/27/why-public-schools-are-finally-getting-savvy-about-marketing/>

A public relations program should provide research, thinking, counseling, and services that help shape the organization to meet the needs of the environment. At the same time, the program should work toward shaping the environment to meet the needs of the organization.



“Everything starts with relationships, including relationships among people and relationships among ideas.”⁶ Emphasize both words, public and relations.

▪ *Gary Marx, Center for Public Outreach*

School Public Relations: The Essential Ingredient to Student and School Success

According to NSRPA, which represents 1,700 school systems, the following strategies are necessary.

Get Started Now

Why should school districts and all school employees be held accountable for their communication success? The research leaves no doubt: The success of schools and programs — and all of the students that they serve — depends on outstanding communication by everyone.

Excellent schools need great teachers, dedicated administrators, safe facilities and responsive programs. But all of these components combined can fail to produce successful students and schools if the mix is missing one vital ingredient: **the active involvement of parents and the community.**

Meaningful school communication is the essential catalyst to getting the kind of parental and community engagement students need to succeed.

Consider the Facts

Effective, on-going, two-way communication is at the heart of successful schools that help students succeed.

Research clearly underscores one straightforward concept: **Students simply do better when parents and the community are involved with schools.** Test scores climb. Remediation rates dip. Graduation rates improve. Everyone understands and values their roles in the success of the school enterprise.

Solid communication is essential to creating the foundation for effective partnerships with parents and the community. Schools — and educators — need to carefully talk and listen as they build the collaborative environment that meaningful engagement needs to truly work.

Parents have very specific expectations for school communication. Those demands have been expanding as changing media and greater access to information-on-demand places more pressure on schools to be open, responsive and transparent.



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⁶ <http://www.nspr.org/cap>



The bottom line: Communication helps schools welcome outsiders in meaningful ways. It accommodates the diverse communication needs communities have. It identifies the meaningful ways in which everyone can take a stake in student achievement, and it provides the accountability framework for planning, monitoring and evaluating communication accomplishments and their links to student and school success.

The typical tangible assets of a public relations effort — brochures, newsletters, web sites and more — all play important roles in disseminating key information. Yet, **successful communication involves both listening and talking** — it interprets the schools for the communities, and it interprets the communities for the schools.

This is why it's called public relations — information is important but relationships count. **Perceptions sometimes matter more than facts.**

This is also why the personal communication of everyone in a school system — both listening and talking — is essential to communication success. The superintendent and district administrators, principals and program leaders, teachers and counselors, and support personnel in all departments need to be supported in their communication roles.

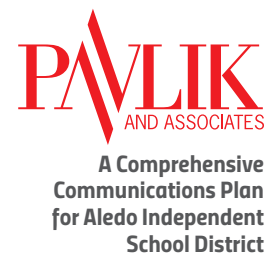
It's important to begin with a clear understanding of just what school public relations is — and is not: Public relations is not a spin process that papers over the bad and shines a spotlight only on the good. Public relations is, however, the process that assures the kind of honesty and transparency in communication that supports meaningful, long-term working relationships.

Committing to communication accountability is a marathon, not a sprint. It's not about the short-term gains that one-shot publicity efforts can sometimes yield. It is about building honest, meaningful partnerships — that recognize the good and bad in a system — on the path to supporting student and school success.

Pro-Active Public Relations

According to a Senior Research Analyst with Corporate Executive Board (CEB) Communications, three shifts have occurred in the Public Relations Affairs space in recent years.

- **Public Relations works with a broader range of stakeholders than ever.** The range of stakeholders with whom companies (i.e. school districts, too) must liaise has expanded to include every possible audience. Communicators should identify stakeholders with the greatest influence in relevant fields, although it has become harder than ever to do so.



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- **Public Relations needs to identify opportunities to lead dialogue – not just respond.** Every company has areas in which it is uniquely positioned to add value and a unique perspective to stakeholder dialogue. Leading companies need to over-invest in communication around the issues against which they can lead dialogue, leverage their company’s subject matter expertise, and shape the nature of the debate.
- **From “managing the message” to “managing the debate.”** In a networked environment, it’s impossible to control the messages stakeholders receive. They receive information via their own networks – not directly from companies. Leading companies don’t try to control the key messages that stakeholders hear, but they do make sure they participate in healthy and constructive dialogue. It won’t stop stakeholders from criticizing you, but it will give you the opportunity to be aware of conversations about you and engage in them.

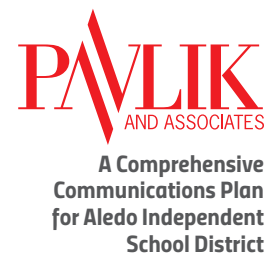
Transparency

The U.S. Department of Education’s Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) is a “one-stop” resource for education stakeholders to learn about data privacy, confidentiality, and security practices related to students. According to PTAC’s website, www.ptac.ed.gov, it is important that school districts communicate what student information they collect, why they collect it, how they use it, and to whom they disclose the information.⁷

School districts are encouraged by the Department to take a proactive approach in communicating with parents, as greater understanding of the district’s privacy policies and practices will help alleviate confusion and misunderstanding.

Best practice recommendations for improving transparency in public education data processes may be found in the Appendix. Included are ways to communicate with parents, what should be said, and what should be considered for posting on a school district’s website.

By auditing Aledo ISD’s communications efforts and process while also considering these PR best practices and strategies, Pavlik aims to ensure that the Aledo ISD brand is clearly communicated at all times.



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⁷<http://ptac.ed.gov/sites/default/files/LEA%20Transparency%20Best%20Practices%20final.pdf>

Communication serves a purpose—to shape public perception. Through this communications audit, Pavlik analyzed the tools, including surveys, branding, and key messaging, that Aledo ISD uses to shape public perceptions emphasizing a consistent brand.



Opinion Surveys

On a yearly basis, Aledo ISD evaluates its Strategic Plan. Contributing to the District Strategic Planning Committee's study and benchmarking are the results of the Parent Climate Survey and the Teacher Climate Survey. Both are done electronically by a third party vendor.

Teacher Climate Survey

Approximately 348 of the 392 teachers in the District participated in the 2014-2015 survey. This is an enormous increase over the previous two years. In fact, it is about double the participation of the year preceding. A participation rate of about 89% is exceptional for any survey, and shows the strong relationship between Aledo ISD and its teachers. Questions that are related to communications include the following; the percentages in parentheses are a total of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement.

- Goals and priorities for “this” school are communicated clearly and frequently by the principal. (94%)
- The teachers in “this” school share their ideas to help each other improve their teaching. (93%)
- My campus administration disseminates information to the faculty in an efficient and timely manner. (90%)
- My campus administration effectively communicates with faculty and staff. (88%)
- Dialogue occurs among teachers at the campus level to vertically align instruction and maximize student success. (90%)
- There is a collaborative effort between teachers and administrators to develop plans for campus improvement. (92%)
- Campus goals and objectives are clearly communicated to teachers by administrators. (94%)
- My requests for technology support are answered effectively in a timely manner. (94%)
- I am able to access the resources I need on my computer such as web pages, software and emails. (92%)

The exceptionally high percentages indicate a positive environment for cooperation and collaboration.

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Parent Climate Survey

Approximately 21 percent of the 5,629 parent households queried responded to the survey; a noteworthy increase from the 15.76 percent participating in the previous school year, 2013 – 2014. There were 1,200 completed responses.



Questions related to communications include the following; the percentages in parentheses is the total of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement.

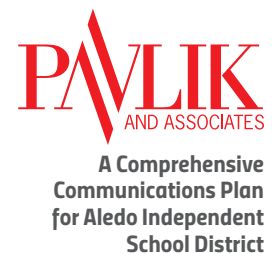
- I am kept adequately informed about school activities, policies and procedures. (90%)
- Teachers let me know how to support my child’s learning at home. (70%)
- I am kept adequately informed about my child’s progress at school. (84%)
- Aleo ISD has a good public image. (95%)
- Aleo ISD communications materials are informative and helpful. (94%)
- The Aleo ISD website provides timely and accurate information. (89%)
- The Aleo ISD website is easy to navigate. (80%)
- I believe the vision for this District is clear. (84%)

A strong majority of respondents agree or agree strongly with these statements. The district should be proud that 95% of parents surveyed believe that “Aleo ISD has a good public image.”

As has been done in the past, goals for increased participation should be put in place annually; the District recognizes the importance of parent participation and looks to increase participation again next year, as noted in the 2015 – 2018 Aleo ISD Strategic Plan.

Aleo ISD Brand

The Aleo ISD brand capitalizes on being a superior school district, and serving a community focused on not only excellence but also family. The stated motto is, “**A Past to Remember; a Future to Mold.**” However, rarely are the past or the future referenced in marketing materials, but communications do focus on the excellence of the school district. The visual brand, or logo, is a single, bold, italicized, “A” with a stylized “Bearcat” superimposed. The “Bearcat” symbolizes strength. The color orange conveys excitement, enthusiasm, and determination.⁸ It is an energetic color that also implies a certain optimism—looking towards the future.



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⁸www.color-wheel-pro.com



Marketing and communications industry standards emphasize that “brand” goes beyond the visual expression of a product. Jerry McLaughlin, the expert who writes about branding, sales and marketing for *Forbes*, distinguishes between two distinct definitions of “brand.” He says that the first is what actually might be called the “brand name,” and refers to the mark that signifies the source of a particular product. For Aledo ISD, this would be the orange “A.”

McLaughlin references David Ogilvy; the “father of advertising,” in defining the second notion, saying a brand is “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes.” It is the general perception in a consumer’s mind regarding a certain product, or “what your prospect thinks of when he or she hears your name.” In sum, it is everything the public associates with your brand (both factual and emotional). “Your **brand name** exists objectively; people can see it. It’s fixed. But your **brand** exists only in someone’s mind.”⁹

For the purpose of this audit, the desired public perception of Aledo ISD was measured throughout the thorough analysis of its brand. A logical starting point for this examination is the mission statement, “...to provide all of its students with an educational program which will allow them to develop intellectually, physically, and socially in order to be responsible citizens and contributing members of society.... all students can learn and that schools can make a difference in the lives of their students.”¹⁰ **The motto and logo are a good expression of the school’s mission, which is full of optimism and looks towards the future of its students.**

Another intended public perception of Aledo ISD is its vision. “Aledo ISD will work collaboratively with parents and community to prepare our students to be successful leaders and problem solvers in a diverse world.”¹¹ The word collaboration is an appropriate word to use in communications because it implies that the community is involved in carrying out Aledo ISD’s vision. The mission statement, vision, and motto is discussed in depth in the following section.

The usage of the brand name or formal logo does not appear to be fully integrated with the mission, vision, and motto. In most of the communications samples that were studied, it seems to appear somewhat separate and apart.



⁹McLaughlin, J. (2011, December 21). What is a brand, anyway? *Forbes.com*.

¹⁰http://general-information-d.aledo.schoolfusion.us/modules/groups/integrated_home.phtml?gid=2297605&sessionid=b44a35220ef2887fcb85820e602d1851

¹¹ *Aledo ISD Plan on a Page*, revised February 16, 2015. This is different from the Aledo ISD website, which states, “Aledo I.S.D. will work collaboratively with the parents and community to prepare our graduates to accept diversity, be creative problem solvers, and leaders of tomorrow.”



The motto, “A Past to Remember; a Future to Mold,” should be considered in developing all communications efforts. In fact, the words “remember” and “mold” should be integrated into summaries of the District and the like. Additionally, key words that appear to be used as an abbreviated motto are “Bearcat Excellence.”

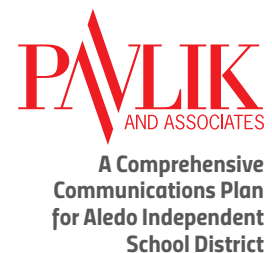
All communications should center on the motto and the brand. Right now, the brand is not necessarily portrayed, even when putting out general, districtwide information. It merely rests at the top of letterhead. It should be incorporated completely into the textual and visual communication.

Aledo ISD Mission Statement

The Aledo ISD mission statement, as stated on the Aledo ISD website, is *“It is the purpose and mission of the Aledo Independent School District to provide all of its students with an educational program which will allow them to develop intellectually, physically, and socially in order to be responsible citizens and contributing members of society. Inherent within this purpose and mission is the belief that all students can learn and that schools can make a difference in the lives of their students.”*¹²

The first part of this mission statement appropriately captures Aledo ISD’s values in that it is not only inclusive of all students, but also focuses on the student as a whole. It looks at how children will develop into responsible individuals while attending Aledo ISD. If Aledo ISD fulfills its mission, students will take these values into their core identity and carry them for life.

The second sentence is further clarification of the mission that does not necessarily serve a purpose in a formal statement. In future renditions of Aledo ISD’s mission statement, the second sentence should either be refined or omitted. It could be included in a list of values or a value statement. The Aledo ISD Strategic Plan (2015 - 2018) includes a lengthy list of values that is all encompassing. A concise version of this list could be integrated into a variety of communications pieces, such as news releases or marketing brochures.



¹² http://general-information-d.aledo.schoolfusion.us/modules/groups/integrated_home.phtml?&gid=2297605&sessionid=4aec5baa0b3672cc90d7f62cf06b3014&t=672319b25c9ba37ec71e8f9d58c837f7

Aledo ISD Motto

Discussed above in reference to Aledo ISD’s overall brand, the motto, “A Past to Remember; a Future to Mold,”¹³ does not seem to be woven into other defining materials. At no place else in communications materials is the “past” of Aledo ISD referenced. This seems misaligned with the overall branding efforts of Aledo ISD. What is the past we are remembering? If Aledo ISD’s past is “worth” remembering, then it should be referenced in other places. On the other hand, **the future of Aledo ISD is worth showcasing.** Continuing to hold extremely high student, staff, and teacher performance standards while fostering a community in which these goals can be met will, undoubtedly, produce a bright future that is molded today.

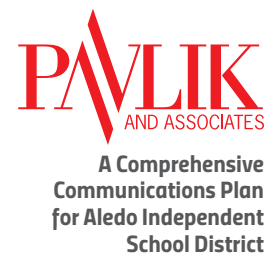
Future discussions should be held about if and how “Bearcat Excellence” is woven into the brand.

Aledo ISD Vision

Aledo ISD’s vision as finalized in the strategic plan, “*Aledo ISD will work collaboratively with parents and community to prepare our students to be successful leaders and problem solvers in a diverse world,*”¹⁴ is powerful and forward-thinking. Unfortunately, there is another version of the vision statement on Aledo ISD’s website that is not as concise. “*Aledo I.S.D. will work collaboratively with the parents and community to prepare our graduates to accept diversity, be creative problem solvers, and leaders of tomorrow.*”¹⁵ Mission and vision statements are of utmost importance to any organization, and should be consistent throughout all materials. The Aledo ISD vision statement, although generally a good expression of the impact Aledo ISD would like to have on its students and the world, should be codified.

Aledo ISD Values and Beliefs

The organization’s values and beliefs are listed in the 2015 – 2018 strategic plan. The list is thorough and an important component. These values should be incorporated into communications materials, and expressed to the public. As it stands currently, they are not reiterated in District materials. A concise list should be developed, highlighting the inherent value noted in the mission statement and used throughout brand materials.



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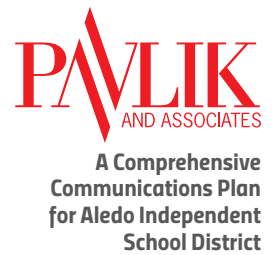
¹³ Aledo ISD strategic plan, revised February 16, 2015

¹⁴ Aledo ISD strategic plan, revised February 16, 2015

¹⁵ Aledo ISD website, http://general-information-d.aledo.schoolfusion.us/modules/groups/integrated_home.phtml?&gid=2297605&sessionid=4aec5baa0b3672cc90d7f62cf06b3014&t=672319b25c9ba37ec71e8f9d58c837f7

Values	Board Priorities	Focus Areas
Education is a shared responsibility of students, school, home and community	Parents and members of the community shall have meaningful opportunities to communicate and participate in the educational processes of the District	Community and Campus engagement
Clear and consistent communication between school and home is essential to student success	The District shall monitor and revise systems and processes to evaluate organizational stakeholder satisfaction	District-wide communication plan
Interactions between Aledo ISD, parents and the community should serve as a model of integrity, responsibility and respect		Community partnerships
The District shall provide systems, processes and resources that support student success and encourage continuous improvements		Annual program effectiveness evaluations. Parent and staff satisfaction feedback surveys

Above is a chart outlining the results of a 2015 report on an evaluation of the 2015 – 2018 strategic plan. It details Aledo ISD’s values and the priorities that address those challenges. By referring to the focus areas listed, Aledo ISD can make sure that those values are addressed in communications.



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Key Message (s)



Looking at the body of communications materials as a whole, there are few key messages that are explicitly stated. Pavlik found some implied key messages as follows.

- Aleo ISD is situated within a strong past that will carry it forward – **implied** in the motto, but not necessarily carried throughout the communications materials.
- Aleo ISD is looking forward to many successes in the future – also **implied** in the motto, but not necessarily carried forward.
- Aleo ISD is transparent – **implied** in bond budget materials.
- Aleo ISD is a partner with the community – **implied** through sponsor organizations on the booster webpage.
- Aleo ISD makes students central – **implied** through the student-focused webpage.

In short, key messaging is implied, and more should be done in order to shape it. The comprehensive communications plan should look at developing key messages that are rooted in the mission, goals, and values of Aleo ISD.

Audience/Stakeholders

Recognizing the audience during a communications audit is an important step in developing a comprehensive, strategic communications plan. By identifying with whom Aleo ISD currently communicates, a plan should be built around those stakeholders with whom Aleo ISD should look to communicate in the future. Key audiences include the following.

- Students – pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and high school
- Parents (including the custodians of children) – sorted into a variety of age groups
- Teachers – all grade levels
- Staff – both at schools and in Aleo ISD’s administration
- Trustees – members of the Aleo ISD school board
- Taxpayers – both business owners and residents
- Potential Taxpayers – those who might move to Aleo ISD
- Seniors – older citizens who may or may not have family members in Aleo ISD schools
- Industry Partners – other school districts, educators, and administrators

Current communications speak to these stakeholders, and future communications should continue this effort.



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Resources



It is beyond the scope of this communications audit to analyze in-depth how resources are currently allocated. From a distance, resources available for the communications process seem to be:

- Staff – Since there is not a department of communications within Aledo ISD, time of various staff members is committed to communications efforts. In addition to performing communications tasks, they are also asked to plan. The superintendent directly oversees communications and branding.
- Technology – Technology is used in Aledo ISD communications. This includes hardware, software, and internet-based resources.
- Budget – Analyzing the District’s financial resources outside of the scope of this communications audit and should be examined at a later date by the administration.

Recommendations as to the appropriate allocation of resources towards the communications process as a whole as well as individual efforts will be made in the strategic communications plan.

A great deal can be understood by analyzing the entire body and individual components of Aledo ISD’s communications materials. Pavlik reviewed communications for effectiveness, quality, and consistency with the Aledo ISD brand.



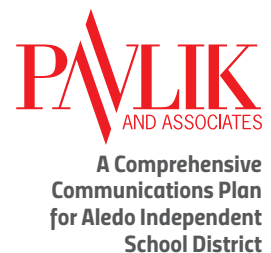
Media Relations

Aledo ISD has distributed hundreds of news releases in the past several years. The topics have been wide-ranging, from athletic performance to foul weather days to the death of a former superintendent. While this is a thorough and proactive way to engage the media and inform the public, it can almost be an overload. The question is how many releases can actually be absorbed by today’s journalists? By sending out too many, the most important news can be in danger of being drowned out by “softer” news; i.e. yesterday’s football scrimmage scores.

Engaging reporters is an art, and making sure news is printed on the front page of the newspaper or picked up by broadcast media is a daily challenge.

Reporters surveyed for the 2014 Business Wire Media Survey revealed the following best practices when it comes to engaging with members of the media.

- Almost 90% of journalists referenced a news release in the previous week, with most reporters (62%) stating that they used one in the past 24 hours.
- Behind breaking news, the most sought after types of news releases include supporting facts (70%), interesting story angles (66%), quotable sources (52%), company background (50%), and trending industry topics (49%). Reporters also indicated a strong interest in news of geographic relevance, key hires, and product launches and updates.
- Approximately a third of journalists (31%) want supporting multimedia. More than half (54%) are more likely to review a press release that includes multimedia than one that does not. The most favored forms of multimedia include photographs (73%), graphics (43%), infographics (32%) and video (27%).
- Email alerts top the list of preferred methods for outreach by reporters (69%). Only 3% of reporters selected social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube for receiving company news).



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- Methods such as text messages, telephone calls, fax and blog posts were even further behind in preference.
- When conducting research on an organization, 92% of reporters use the main website and 77% visit the online newsroom. Among the most desired content are news releases (88%), and 55% of reporters prefer them to be in HTML/text format (only 9% want PDF format).

News releases are regularly distributed to *The Community News* (local Aledo newspaper), *Weatherford Democrat*, *Aledo Extra*, *Weatherford Star-Telegram*, *Parker County Today* and *Texas Daily Post*. Sometimes, “larger news” such as bond elections may be covered in *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. The task of distribution is the responsibility of an Aledo ISD staff person. Additionally, the athletic director forwards pertinent news to sports writers around DFW. Some broadcast/television media have covered Aledo ISD athletics news.

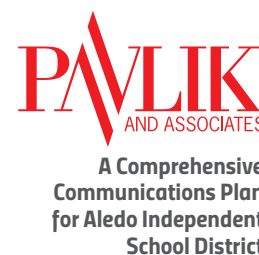
With the enormous variety of news releases being distributed, consistent branding on all counts is difficult. At the same time, this means that there is written communication about Aledo ISD that does not fit in with the overall brand. Increased consideration should be given to releases, and the number of those should be paired significantly down.

At this point, there is not consistent formatting of releases. Different fonts and headers are used. Furthermore, there is not a “boiler plate” paragraph about Aledo ISD at the bottom that contains the key messages discussed earlier.

Each and every contact with the media that is made should be aligned with the Aledo ISD brand.

Crisis Communication

Currently, there is not a written crisis (situational) communications plan for Aledo ISD although one exists for operations that includes references to external communications. **Crisis Management** is a term that can misconstrued when discussing when, how, and what information should be disseminated. One definition of “crisis” that appears in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “a situation that has reached a critical phase.” In local government, the lack of information or the presence of inaccurate information results in confusion—and even fear—among stakeholders and the general public.



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One of the key steps in crisis management is to be prepared before it happens. Aleo ISD has taken one step in this direction with the creation of a letter to all parents titled, “Work the Plan”—ALEDO ISD EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS. Although there does not appear to have been a reason for its distribution yet, this is an important component of emergency communications in that it informs the public beforehand of how Aleo ISD will communicate during an emergency as it unfolds. The letter is a valuable tool in combating fear, panic, confusion and misinformation. It should be distributed to parents at the appropriate time.

Other situational communications efforts to this point have included postings on ParentLink (and text alerts) as well as news releases. Additional outlets could be used such as phone calls, social media, and more. All of this should be outlined in a clear, concise crisis management plan. Furthermore, boiler plate information should be developed beforehand so that all action items are “turn-key” when a need presents itself.

Printed Materials

Aleo ISD has not notably engaged in print communications in the past few years. Most communications has been digital, either on the website, social media, or through smartphone apps. Two materials that were reviewed for the purpose of this communications audit were Aleo ISD’s advertisement in the *East Parker County Newcomers’ Guide* and a bond election flyer.

The *East Parker County Newcomers’ Guide* is printed by the East Parker County Chamber of Commerce and introduces new members of the community to Aleo ISD. The advertisement for 2015 – 2016 conveys the key message of excellence in education. It repeats the phrase, “Bearcat Excellence.” If this is a term that Aleo ISD would like to become part of brand, it should be included more frequently in marketing efforts. The pictures are appropriate representation of the brand, and the copy components are well-written. The actual logo is small, though, in comparison to other images on the page. Also, including the motto in the subhead is an appropriate use within the brand.

A second example of print media reviewed for the communications audit is the 2015 Bond Election flyer. This is an excellent example of material that could be used to further Aleo ISD’s brand, but falls slightly short. It effectively conveys information and tax dollars spent, but the only branded component is the Aleo ISD logo in the upper, left-hand corner of the front page. It is a good use of infographics. It calls the reader to action in that it notifies him or her of not only Election Day, but also Aleo ISD’s presence on social media. It directs the reader to the Aleo ISD Bond page, www.AleoISDBond.org, which keeps it separate from the overall Aleo ISD brand.



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Industry practices indicate that print media continues to be an excellent way to communicate with stakeholders and clients. In a world that is becoming increasingly digital, it can be easier to stand out in print in certain circumstances because more and more organizations are starting to rely solely on the internet to communicate. This makes printed communications like direct mail a suitable format in which to communicate truly important or newsworthy information. Furthermore, a print format lends additional credibility or legitimacy to a piece that might not be afforded to online communications.

Aledo ISD Website

Aledo ISD, like most other organizations in today's world, is utilizing digital marketing and communications. This means that a substantial portion of materials provided during the communications audit were web-based, mainly the website, social media, and the parent portal application. Aledo ISD engages mostly in digital communication because this is how it is perceived that Aledo ISD's audiences expect to be engaged.

The Aledo ISD website (<http://aledo.schoolfusion.us/>), by and large, is full of useful information. It is robust—almost to the point of being overwhelming. Unfortunately, School Fusion, the platform on which it operates, is out of date. This means that no statistics on usage are available. For the purposes of this communications audit, the website was reviewed “as observed,” and no consideration was given to how the site is actually viewed by real world users. As future research allows, website usage should be closely monitored through a service like Google Analytics. This allows for necessary changes to be made in a timely manner that maximize utility.

Several issues are to be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of a website. The Web Marketing Association created a concise list¹⁶ used in judging websites that includes the following.

- **Design** – What does the website look like? Do the colors make sense? Is it an appealing use of visuals and photographs?
- **Innovation** – Does the website look like a template? Is it imaginative? Does it tell the organization's unique story in a compelling manner? Does it enhance the individuality of the brand?
- **Content** – Is the content appropriate, timely, interesting, and useful?
- **Technology** – Does the website “work”? Does it incorporate a logical number of technological advancements? Is the use of technology appropriate to the audience?

¹⁶http://www.webaward.org/judging_process.asp#.ViAXyn6rTcs



- **Interactivity** – Does the website call the user to action? Does it engage the user?
- **Navigability** – Is the website easy to use?

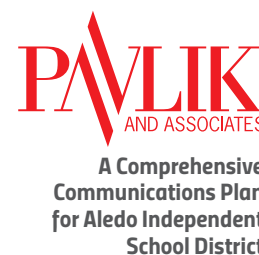
These criteria were considered when conducting the communications audit, recognizing, by and large, successful websites tell a story. Aleo ISD’s “story” is one of a small community focused intently on excellence, and a school district that serves its citizens with pride and distinction.

Individual pages were analyzed on a case-by-case basis, but overall the website is extremely information-heavy. There is little to no graphic engagement outside of pictures accompanying news release information. Releases appear to be updated information as needed, which has actually turned out to be almost daily. Topics on the homepage are varied to the point of being confusing. They cover everything from athletics, to the end of

daylight savings times, to elementary school fundraising projects. While diverse information is encouraged on a website, this much variation can be confusing for a user. It can also be detrimental to the website’s overall goal, which is to clearly tell Aleo ISD’s story and convey information.

Navigation and links throughout the website are disconnected and inconsistent. Navigation on the left hand side, which

appears to be general, districtwide information, changes from page to page. Navigational inconsistency within a website leads to user frustration and risks the person leaving the website before the purpose that’s driving the visit is met. Additional districtwide information is available through a link at the top navigation bar, which also has links to individual school websites, parent information, student information, and employees. Two navigation bars without clear organization can create enormous confusion and frustration.



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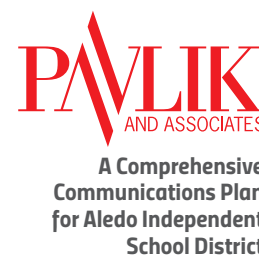
Staff members recognize Aledo ISD's confusing navigation. The industry standard establishes that all information being searched should be accessible with a minimum of "three clicks" from the homepage. Several topics were tested, including transportation (a common concern for parents with children of any age in school). Basic information and procedures were not found. There is the assumption that this could be due to the fact that individual schools maintain transportation information, but that is not communicated and individual schools are not keeping the key information on their sites.

The lack of easy-to-find information about transportation points to the overall lack of uniformity among the individual school websites. Each school website is tied to a unique identity, which can be beneficial in shaping the brand of that school, but does little to support the umbrella brand of Aledo ISD. Furthermore, to the viewer, the individual school's webpages still appear

to be within the framework of Aledo ISD, and thus should be consistent with the Aledo ISD brand. Navigation among pages is inconsistent, which can be exasperating for a user who is looking for specific information on a specific Aledo ISD campus.

The content on the homepage of Aledo ISD's webpage is, undoubtedly, timely, as it appears to be updated by news releases almost daily. It is beyond the scope of this communications audit to determine its

accuracy, so it is assumed to be correct for the purpose of this analysis. All materials should be reviewed thoroughly by Aledo ISD staff in order to confirm accuracy. Based on parent reviews discussed earlier in this report, website content is useful. Taking into account this positive feedback, content should be pared down and streamlined. In other words, the content is useful, but it is overpowering. **Confusing navigation, unnecessary wordiness, and other factors contribute to the page's overwhelming content.**



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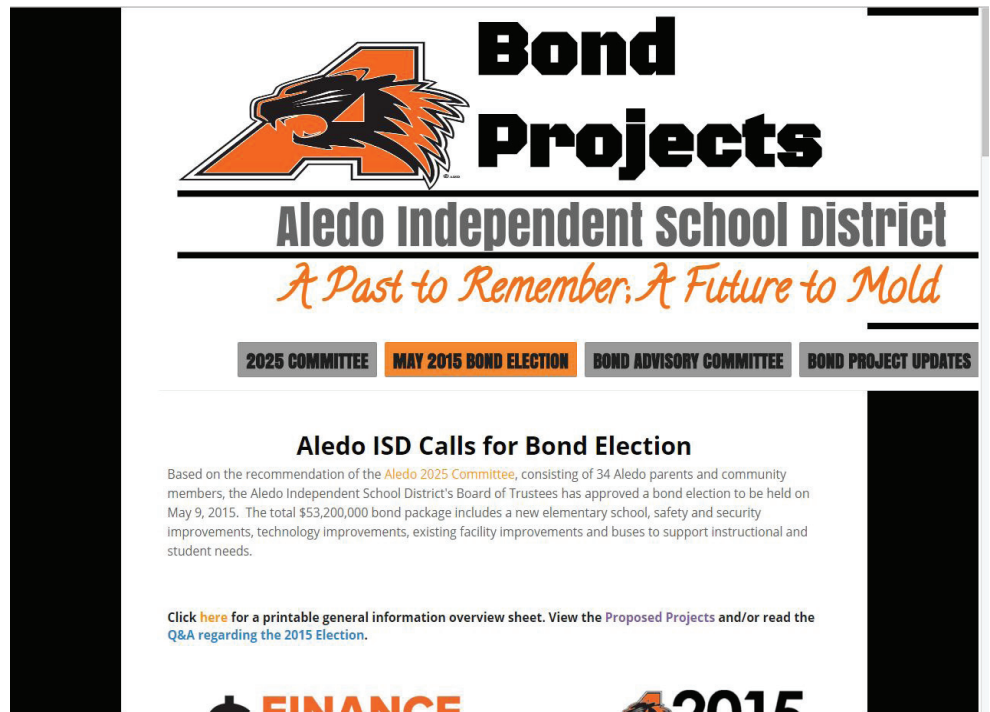
Schools represented with a homepage off of the Aledo ISD page include:

1. Aledo High School
2. The Learning Center
3. Daniel Ninth Grade Campus
4. Aledo Middle School
5. McAnally Intermediate School
6. Coder Elementary
7. McCall Elementary
8. Stuard Elementary
9. Vandagriff Elementary



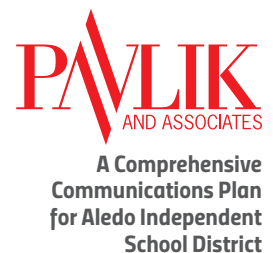
There is no mobile website for Aledo ISD. In today's world, this can be detrimental to the functionality of the website. When a site that is text-heavy does not have appropriate information highlighted on a mobile website, it renders it useless. People today often view websites from a smartphone or a tablet.

The website does not fit into Aledo ISD's overall brand. It is outdated, confusing, and ineffective. Although parents appear to say that they Aledo is communicating in a helpful way, it seems that more information is probably gathered from the parent smartphone application or social media.



Other Webpages

Other webpages that are linked off of the Aledo ISD homepage should be aligned with Aledo ISD's brand. They include the sites like the May 2015 Bond Election. Although this website contains the Aledo ISD logo and motto, it has a completely different design and feel than the Aledo ISD homepage. Thus, it seems as if it is controlled and managed by a completely separate entity rather than the Aledo ISD homepage. Although information is timely, accurate, and easily understood, it is not aligned with the brand. Other ancillary websites should also be brought into alignment with the brand.



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Smartphone Application (ParentLink)



The Smartphone App (app) is a good expression of Aledo ISD's brand. It conveys useful and timely information, and allows parents, students, and other users to manage their settings so that they are getting only the information pertaining to their specific interests. Assuming that technology stays up-to-date and the app continues to function as it should, it will continue to be an excellent way to communicate with parents.

Many of the functionalities of the website are included on the app and are much more user-friendly in this format. These include the capability to pay students' bills, inclement weather notifications, driving directions to different campuses, athletic scores, and others. The difference between the app and a mobile version of Aledo ISD's website is that the user needs to be interested enough to go ahead and download it for a smartphone. Although it is free, it still takes effort on the part of the user to go beyond just searching a webpage. Furthermore, it takes long-term commitment because the user more than likely will store the app in his or her phone.

Social Media

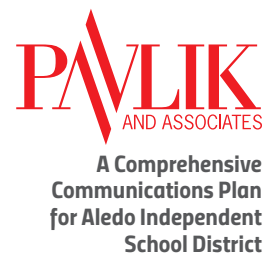
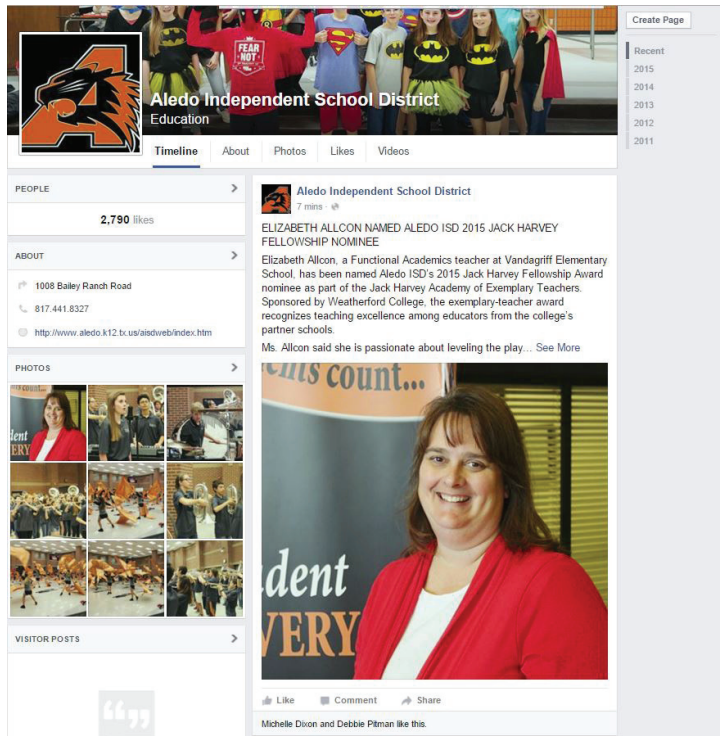
Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, and others) is an effective community engagement tool.

Moreover, it holds enormous possibility for crisis/situational management or generating excitement around special events.

A 2014 study from Baylor University¹⁷ discussing best practices in social media management explains the ways social media can be used in "reputation management," including:

- predicting potential problems
- anticipating threats
- minimizing surprises
- resolving issues
- preventing crises

Stakeholders interacting with the District through social media can spread the word about their experiences to many audiences much faster than with traditional media.



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¹⁷ Neill, M. S., & Moody, M. Who is responsible for what? Examining strategic roles in social media management. Public Relations Review (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.014>



One of Aledo ISD's greatest strengths in the communications process is its social media engagement. The organization is extremely active on Facebook and Twitter, sometimes posting multiple times a day. There is more often than not a call to action, and posts are appropriate lengths. They truly engage the audience, even going so far as to allow other users to comment on Facebook.

Thus, social media is used appropriately as a conversation between the organization and the public. It both gives information and allows for feedback.

The Facebook page is comprehensive. There is a lot communicated on the page, including sports statistics, meetings, successes, parenting tips. Pavlik suggests that this is, in fact, too much variety in topics. By posting so frequently on so many topics, Aledo ISD may risk losing the interest of followers because not every Facebook user wants to hear about the successes of the high school football team and an elementary school's bus schedule at the same time.

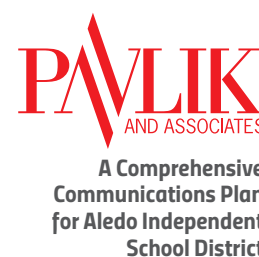
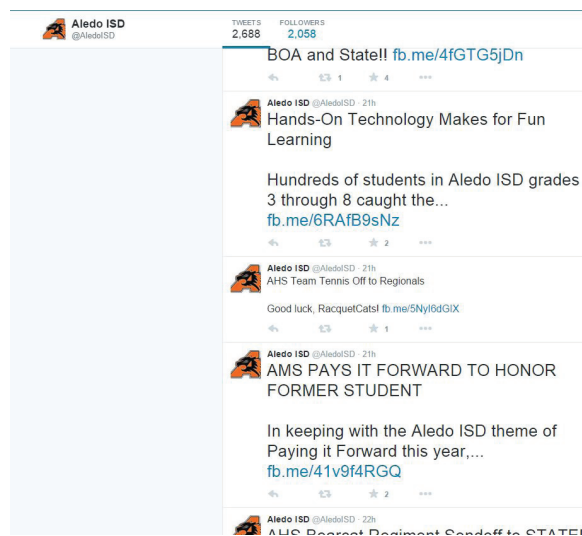
Tweets (on Twitter) occur as frequently as Facebook quotes, and take the same risks as overloading users.

Overall, Aledo ISD effectively uses social media to disseminate information and engage stakeholders.

Public Engagement

Pavlik made note of a Community Corner Newsletter in the body of sample news releases. Newsletters are effective ways in which to engage the public, especially if they are distributed monthly and contain timely information. They appear to be distributed in email format, but should also be printed for segments of the community who do not participate in email communication. Furthermore, their content should be reviewed regularly to ensure that it stays relevant and up-to-date.

Pavlik has not fully reviewed other public engagement materials which may be available for brand consistency, but there is mention of coffees with the superintendent and special meetings on the website calendar and in other places online such as social media. Presentations and handouts distributed at these public events should also emphasize Aledo ISD's strong brand. Boiler plate descriptions, the logo, and other branding items should be included every time anything is distributed to the public. This will be addressed in the strategic communications plan.



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The findings of the communications audit prepared by Pavlik and Associates in late summer and early fall 2015, show the intense commitment on the part of Aledo ISD's administration to fulfill the District's mission and to keep its vision foremost in its outreach to and collaboration with employees, students, parents and the greater community. Dr. Derek City's leadership and goals as Superintendent are commendable, and the staff members to whom he looks to perform communication tasks are enthusiastic.



Aledo ISD's Branding

In moving forward to sharpen its communications and outreach activities, the District should acknowledge how its solid growth and bright future can be impacted by the effectiveness of its overall brand. The District is, no doubt, clear on its vision and core values, but it is imperative that, going forward, communications tactics must be uniform in their messages.

Key Messages

The foundation of the District's overarching communications plan, while not apparent during this analysis, must be the key messages that evoke the mission, vision and goals of the District. Primary and secondary messages should be agreed upon and subsequently expressed in all written and, as appropriate, oral communications.

Website

The audit confirmed what administration experiences firsthand, that being the greatest detriment to the District's communications proficiencies is its internet and website provider School Fusion, whose platforms and technologies are out-of-date.

The District should move as quickly as possible to contract with another provider(s) to design and populate its official website. The new design should be brand-centric. (While this term is trade-marked by Gullan & Gullan Advertising, its meaning and implications are spoken to in this report.) Simply put, Aledo ISD's brand should be woven throughout the website.

During the development of the new website, decisions must be made as how best to assure that other school-related websites are extensions of the District's brand and are positioned logically for persons seeking information about the myriad of activities and programs under the District's umbrella.

Search Engine Optimization and Google Analytics are important tools for managing the website and should be part of the new functionality.



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Social Media

The District has successfully embraced Facebook and Twitter. However, the District should not base its effectiveness in using social media on how much is done. Key messages must always be woven into posts, and recipients of those posts cannot become overwhelmed by the sheer number on a daily basis.



Media Relations

A strong, pro-active media relations program is imperative to the success of any organization, especially for a tax-supported entity such as a public school district. The District uses one of the most common and effective tools, that being news releases. However, the success of this type of communication is not necessarily based on the frequency of distribution but rather on the importance, timeliness, uniqueness, and completeness of each news release. The District's communications staff should work together to set a manageable course for working with local media. Consideration should be given to establishing District leaders as experts in the community to whom media can look, seeking qualified opinions on education issues being discussed in the mainstream.

Crisis (Situational) Management

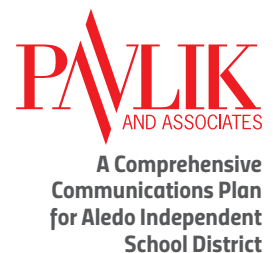
Fortunately, Aledo ISD has not, in recent times, been confronted with an emergency situation that was not contained immediately. Nor has the District experienced allegations of wrong-doing as a whole or on the part of individuals associated with the public school system. Situational management must be an integral part of the District's overall communications plan, with provisions of communicating with internal and external audiences.

Printed Materials

While the District should be recognized for its in-depth and information-rich online and social media content, Aledo ISD should consider strategically producing printed materials that communicate with target audiences. For example, the East Parker County Newcomers' Guide is appropriate.

Public Engagement

The District should make certain that the brand is prevalent in all materials that are used in and around community meetings, PowerPoint presentations for both internal and external purposes, and remarks given publicly by school officials.



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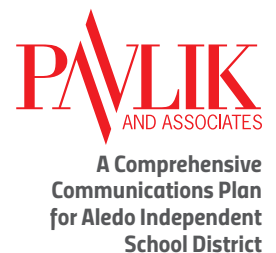
Assets and Resources

As the District grows, so must the assets and resources available for communications functions and initiatives. The strategic communications plan will establish goals that are attainable, given budget restraints.



Summary

In terms of communications and public relations, first and foremost, Aleo ISD must be open and transparent. A comprehensive and strategic communications plan provides for this openness and transparency which, in turn, results in the greater community's respect, confidence, collaboration and overall support.



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