

Albany Area Schools



March 2016
Communication Plan

DRAFT

PURPOSE

The development of strategic, flexible, organized, and easy-to-execute communications tools for Albany Area Schools will enable the district to:

- Identify and evaluate existing communications products
- Identify opportunities for expanding communications efforts in a gradual, realistic manner as part of a larger strategic effort
- Eliminate duplicate efforts through streamlining communications processes
- Link communications efforts
- Communicate to the internal district community and the broader Albany Area Schools community the school district's mission, vision, goals, accomplishments, news, and upcoming events
- Maximize staff knowledge of school buildings and programs so they become ambassadors of the district's mission and vision
- Identify external audiences and most effective means of communication(s)
- Target messages to specific district and/or community audiences
- Clarify and strengthen the district's brand that will be reflected in all communications materials and recognized in association with the district internally and externally
- Institute an annual review process that monitors and assesses individual components of the communications plan

AUDIT SUMMARY

In meeting with community members and district staff, a number of themes emerged that are key to evaluating the district's current communication efforts as well as any opportunities for expanded contact with the district's internal and external communities. Participants were asked about preferred district communication sources, strengths and weaknesses within the district's current efforts, barriers to effective communication, and "wish list" communication items. Following is a summary of findings and observations from the meetings:

- **Overall the community is very positive about the school district.** Many participants expressed the desire to ensure this "good feeling" continues. ("When I talk to people about what's happening I only hear good feedback." "The community is very supportive of the schools.")
- **The superintendent is a visible, approachable ambassador.** "He is very present at our school." "I sense that he is very approachable."
- **The district needs to improve communication with the broader community.** "If I didn't have children I wouldn't hear very much." "It's important that what we are pushing out encompasses the wide group and is not just about families with students."
- **A lot of current communication requires action on behalf of the recipient.** "I don't like that I have to go out to the website. If I forget to look then I don't have that information. I wish there was an easier way to get that information."
- **Participants struggled to identify consistent methods of district communication.** All participants focused on sources that are not within the district (*The Enterprise*, KAZM, etc.). "The district needs to focus on developing new ways to communicate but they also need to improve the consistency of what they have in place."

AUDIT SUMMARY (continued)

- **The community education newsletter is not an effective vehicle for district news.** “I think if people aren’t going to take a class they just throw it away.” “I don’t know many people who read the district news in the community education bulletin.” “It’s not news. It’s feel good things.”
- **There is a desire to continue public meetings started during bond effort.** Some participants discussed the potential for 2-3 meetings per year at sites off campus that would have specific topics yet with open-ended Q&A opportunities.
- **There is a need for more effective engagement of older adults.** “How can we make this their district? They are taxpayers and they have a stake in it. What can we create to bring them in?” “We have group of older residents who are negative about not seeing the value of their tax dollars working in the school district. I want them to see their money going toward something that benefits the community.”
- **The website needs more effective navigation.** “The district website is hard to navigate. It’s a beast. We have a lot of families who want to use the website and have trouble finding what they want. It’s not user friendly.”
- **The district should more effectively leverage its positive relationship with *The Enterprise*.** *The Enterprise* welcomes stories presented both as story ideas or as fully developed news articles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop District Brand Standards

The district will conduct a comprehensive review of its current graphic identity, including district and site logos, the district tagline, and graphic design elements. The process will enable the district to: develop formal brand standards that are communicated to district staff; manage its graphic identity by taking the guesswork out of such decisions as key colors, fonts, etc.; develop templates reflecting the district's graphic identity that will greatly reduce development time; and develop guidelines by which the logo, tagline, and graphic identity are used by the school community with the expectations that these guidelines will be enforced at all levels.

Implement Consistent Communication Processes Across All Schools

This sounds like an open-ended concept but in short the idea is to ensure that each site has a communication lead who is responsible for gathering news, distributing news to parents/families, and sharing news with the district so that it can be communicated to the broader community. The site administration will work closely with this staff member to approve distribution of news items in a timely manner. As students move through the schools, access to news will be seamless for parents/families because each school will have the same processes in place.

Introduce an Electronic Weekly Newsletter at All Schools and at the District Level

There are a number of “plug and play” electronic newsletter options available for schools to use. The goal is to implement an easy-to-use format that is minimal work for staff to produce a weekly communication piece for staff and families. All schools and programs that leverage this enews system will distribute their weekly news on the same day and at the same time. In addition, the district is able to leverage this product to distribute news of interest or of an urgent nature to parents/families. The newsletter pulls email addresses from the student information system and there is a concrete process for accepting news as well as how long one news item can run in a particular electronic newsletter to ensure parents/families are receiving “fresh” news.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

Strengthen the “Push” Approach to Communications

As an overarching concept, the district is urged to adopt a “push” communication strategy. To ensure the goodwill that emerged from the recent bond referendum effort, the district should implement communication efforts that take district news TO the community. Examples include: pushing press releases out to the local newspaper; identifying all formal and informal community groups and attending meetings on a regular basis, etc.

Develop a Quarterly Community Newsletter

The district will develop a quarterly newsletter that addresses district-level topics of broad interest to ALL community members. It is easy to fall back on addressing the “parent” audience but this communication vehicle must remain focused on the interests of the broader community as it will be the primary district-generated communication vehicle pushed out to all district residents.

Improve Website Navigation

The district will evaluate content type and timing to ensure the placement and flow of information makes it accessible to first-time users as well as parents, staff, and students. The process will evaluate the effectiveness of current website navigation (including terminology) and ability for users to access critical information; evaluate quality and depth of information re: district, sites, and programs that may be sought by first-time users; identify areas of potential expansion of website offerings; and ensure the site’s grammatical integrity.

Implement a Centralized *Enterprise* Press Release Submission Process

As it stands, the local paper drives and owns the majority of news that appears in the paper. While this is a very positive relationship, the district will implement a formalized process for generating news, formatting the news in a press release format (with administrator and staff quotes as well as contact for more information and photos if relevant), and submitting it to the local paper. At least one release each week should be the baseline expectation and content can be rotated among administrators and staff members.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

Establish a Social Media Schedule

The district will leverage opportunities via Facebook and Twitter by linking the two and setting a consistent schedule for communicating good news about students, staff, the schools, and the community via social media. The goal should be a minimum of three posts per week each with an image.

Host Periodic Community Meetings

Independent of any particular issue, Albany Area Schools will host community meetings 2-3 times per year at an independent community location. Participating citizens will have the opportunity to voice their needs, hopes, and concerns as they relate to the school district. The school district, in turn, can use the opportunity to learn what people think about important issues as well as inform attendees about important district-related issues.

Strengthen Communication Ties with the Community's Older Adults

The proposed quarterly district newsletter is certainly one way to engage the community's older adults in school-related events and news. But the district's athletics & activities access card provides an untapped opportunity to gather older adult contact information and shape communication for their interests. It is even possible to run a list of all households, for example, with at least one resident 60+ and develop events and targeted communication specifically for their interests.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

	April 2016	May 2016	June 2016	July 2016
Brand Standards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Updated logo files/ brand standards document • Notes: Finalized April 1/uploaded to and accessible on district share 	X			
Social Media Schedule <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Link Facebook & Twitter/establish publishing schedule/assign responsibility • Notes: Schedule prepared by April 15 	X			
Press Releases <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Online submission tool/communication re: need for stories/process outline • Notes: Online tool and process prepared by May 1 	X			
School-based Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Communication with administration to determine ownership of school-based communications/outline of 2016-2017 responsibilities and support • Notes: Proposed structure May 1 	X	X		
Electronic Weekly Newsletter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Provider selected/develop template/provide training for 2016-2017 • Notes: Provider selected and template developed by May 1/training during May 2016 	X	X		
Quarterly Community Newsletter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Develop newsletter template/establish editorial calendar/communicate with staff • Notes: Template by April 1/editorial calendar and communication by May 15 for 2016-2017 	X	X		
Website Navigation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliverable: Audit of district/schools homepages/ outline of recommendations • Notes: Recommendations ready by June 15 			X	

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE (continued)

	April 2016	May 2016	June 2016	July 2016
Older Adults <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deliverable: Evaluate opportunities to engage older adults and submit proposal• Notes: Proposal due July 15				X
Community Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deliverable: Determine a schedule and topics for 2016-2017• Notes: Finalized July 15				X

MAY 2016 (example)

As soon as templates have been developed and processes have been established, the district will receive a 12-month calendar (July 1-June 30) detailing communication-related activities for the 2016-2017 school year.

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