Communications Plan

2012-13

Communication works well for those who work at it.

-John Powell
Introduction

Everyone is talking about public schools. Politicians are talking about them on television, parents are talking about them over coffee, Realtors® are talking about them during open house events - everyone's talking about our schools, all the time. But when people are talking about our schools, are the conversations informed and fact-based? Do people know where to get information about what's happening in our schools today? Do they know how to get involved when something comes up that really matters to them?

Everyone talks about public schools because everyone has a stake in what they do. Employers want high school graduates who are ready for the workforce. Higher education wants high school graduates who have mastered core subject areas. Community members want high school graduates who are good citizens and put leadership skills to work in their neighborhoods. Public schools have many important stakeholder groups - school employees, students, parents, employers, taxpayers, community organizations, higher education institutions, the media, and more. These stakeholder groups represent our customers. For public schools, communicating with these stakeholder groups is an act of social responsibility, and it is also good business. Communications in the education environment can increase understanding of the successes and challenges of today's schools, and increase broad-based support for meeting challenges at many levels.

Communications help schools to effectively meet the constant and increasing demands for information from parents and other stakeholders, and to engage them as partners in improving student achievement. Just like successful businesses, successful schools know good communication is the key to achieving aggressive goals for improving the student learning experience.

Communications are not to be left to chance or used only when things go wrong. Communications enable us to create an environment in which we can achieve goals for student learning and show our accountability. Communications help us build support for taxpayers to invest in our schools and to spot potential problems to stop them before they happen. In education, communications must be strategic, honest, systematic, and continuous. In an era of school choice, communications are critical.

During the 2011-12 school year, Accomack County Public Schools developed a new vision, mission and goals. This Communications Plan details specific strategies that must be taken to move the division ahead in achieving its overall goals. Designed to be realistic to achieve and subject to regular evaluation, the plan can - and will - evolve as the environment changes. The plan also is an important tool for directing human and financial resources for the communications purpose.
Our Guiding Principles and Philosophy

Our Communications Plan is based on the following principles and philosophy, which serve to guide its overall development:

1. **Successful, high-performing organizations are those that communicate effectively.**

Studies indicate that when schools listen to their stakeholders, engage them in school activities, and respond to their needs, they become successful organizations. When stakeholders become partners with their local schools, educators and administrators excel, motivation soars, and most importantly of all, students succeed.

2. **Communications is a two-way process that involves and engages internal and external stakeholders.**

Communications are most effective when there are regular opportunities for internal stakeholders – students and division employees – and external stakeholders – parents, business owners, and community leaders – to provide feedback, to offer input on what they believe the schools should be doing, and to engage in school activities.

3. **We are responsible for telling the story of Accomack County Public Schools.**

According to a Gallup poll, only 4% of American citizens get news about their local public schools directly from the schools, 24% learn about their local schools from newspapers, 18% receive news from friends and relatives, and 10% learn about the schools from their children who are students there. In order to be chosen by our stakeholders as a reliable source for accurate and honest information and news about our schools, we must be proactive about telling our story and using communications vehicles that are easy-to-read and eye-catching. We also must work with the media to facilitate their reporting of news and information related to our schools.

4. **To tell our story effectively, we must communicate with one clear voice.**

Our Communications Plan is built using key messages that reflect what our schools are about. By basing our communications on these key messages, we are better able to present what we want others to know clearly, consistently, and accurately.

5. **Everyone who works for or on behalf of Accomack County Public Schools is an important communicator.**

As image-makers or image-breakers, our employees are our most important communicators. No matter what their position within the school division, they serve as information sources and ambassadors for our schools. When they are well informed themselves, they can be invaluable as bridge builders, cheerleaders, and translators.
6. Our central staff serves as a resource to employees in our schools to help them tell their own unique stories.

With more than 800 employees working in schools and central office departments, a decentralized communications system makes sense. Each school knows best what news it needs to disseminate about its activities. When our schools communicate independently, with support from central office administrators, they are better able to respond quickly to questions and to function in the spirit of full disclosure.

7. Our communications efforts must be revised through ongoing evaluations to meet the changing needs of our schools and the community.

Dynamic organizations are always changing, and communications efforts must keep pace. Our Communications Plan is a fluid document that will evolve. In order to remain a vital and useful tool, the plan will be evaluated every six months and revised and updated as necessary to reflect changing division needs.

**Our Goals**

Our goals are to raise awareness and improve understanding among all stakeholders of the successes and challenges of Accomack County Public Schools through a variety of media channels. Our four goals are:

1. Improve understanding of ongoing and future school division initiatives,
2. Raise awareness of successes and challenges of the school division,
3. Provide an avenue for additional community input, and
4. Recognize the efforts and successes at individual schools.

Our audiences reach beyond central office administrators, school administrators, teachers, and support staff, including parents, students, community leaders, businesses, media and the general public. We want to work collaboratively to improve the quality of public education by making parents and the community aware of what is happening with our students in our schools. We must broadcast to the community the key issues facing education today. Our governing body, the School Board, must work together to be compassionate regarding the fair treatment of system employees and students.

**Our Objectives**

The Communications Plan will help produce...

- A school division in which communications are an integral part of all services and programs.
• A division that speaks with “one clear voice” to its stakeholders.

• Stakeholders who feel valued by, involved in, and supportive of our schools.

• Stakeholders who make Accomack County Public Schools their schools of choice based on the quality of educational opportunities for students.

• Proactive communications and public relations efforts directed to both internal and external stakeholders to inform them of division achievements and challenges as well as educational issues at the local, state, and federal levels.

• Focused communications efforts on specific critical issues such as student achievement.

• Focused public relations efforts for specific stakeholder groups such as Realtors®.

• New lines of internal communications that build trust and morale among employees, and equip them to be effective communications liaisons between our schools and stakeholders.

• Training opportunities that develop administrators who are not only strong instructional leaders and operations managers, but also models of good communications skills and practices.

• Two-way communications strategies to solicit feedback on division issues and programs to monitor effectiveness and respond to stakeholder needs.

• Strategies for engaging populations typically isolated from our schools.

• Strengthened crisis communications processes and networks.

Our Key Messages

There’s a lot of noise out there. Today the average American is bombarded with more than 3,000 marketing messages a day. To help a message be heard loud and clear, organizations must practice key message development and discipline. More often than not, people communicate without knowing what they want the audience, or target stakeholder group, to remember. Key messages lead to more accurate and effective communications. They are specific messages that support a communications need of a school, division, or issue. They are planned with the purpose of promoting both an organization’s product and its potential. Key messages are used strategically and are a foundation for good communications.

Doing something good and not letting anyone know about it is like winking in the dark.

—Larry Ascough
The key messages for the Accomack County Public Schools Communications Plan were our mission and goals gleaned from an environmental scan of the division that formed the development of our vision. Our three general, overreaching division key messages are listed here. As part of the Communications Plan implementation, specific sub-themes will be developed under each key message and supporting evidence will be compiled to validate the accuracy of the key messages. These messages are useful in helping us to craft communications that resonate with stakeholder groups. Each Communications Plan strategy will be linked to one or more of these key messages tailored for the target stakeholder group. This better equips our division to speak in “one clear voice” to our stakeholders and keeps our communications focused and on target.

1. Prepared for further education, citizenship, and work

Accomack County Public Schools is committed to preparing all students to be successful in further education, citizenship, and work. We do this by offering a challenging student-centered curriculum, as well as intervention, remediation and other programs designed to build student capacity through knowledge, understanding and skill acquisition needed to be successful no matter what their future plans include.

2. Learning communities

Accomack County Public Schools are learning communities. We are committed to continuous improvement through both student and adult learning in safe and welcoming environments. We value our extended school communities and welcome parents, business and community leaders, and local residents as our partners.

3. Efficient and effective use of resources

Accomack County Public Schools use efficient, transparent systems for the allocation and alignment of resources to support our vision, mission, and goals. We are results-oriented, using a variety of indicators as measures of success.
Our Recommendations

1. Establish ongoing internal communications as a division priority for building pride, ownership, and a commitment to customer service among division employees.

2. Develop effective methods of informing stakeholders of division accomplishments and challenges, and educational issues at the local, state, and federal levels.

3. Develop and implement a system to monitor the accuracy, clarity, and consistency of messages in the division’s communications efforts.

4. Develop opportunities for two-way communication between the division and external stakeholders that will identify community needs and enable community members to contribute to division initiatives.

Our Strategies

1. Evaluate best way to disseminate information about school and division information on a community-wide basis.

2. Develop general brochure for division.

3. Review annual back-to-school information sent to parents.

4. Communicate important division announcements for parents (ex: school closings) in languages other than English.

5. Implement the new division website and brand identity.


7. Provide schools with monthly articles on district issues for publication in their newsletters.

8. Begin division e-news service.

9. Designate a specific person to have final approval of division public relations and communications efforts.

All institutions live or die by public opinion.

-James Trolley, Chrysler Corp.
10. Establish clear guidelines for which types of communication should come from the central office and which should be generated by schools, including news releases.

11. Establish a review and approval process for all division-level communications for external stakeholder groups, including regular advance and post-event press releases that meet local media deadlines.

12. Develop a multi-media presentation to be used for recruiting and to increase public awareness.

13. Establish expectations for e-mail and voice communication.

14. Establish norms for internal meeting to continue notification, agenda, and follow-up expectations at both the division and school levels.

15. Expand use of electronic communication.

16. Ensure both division and school-level webpage information is up-to-date including announcements and school-level events.

17. Establish monthly Superintendent’s blog.

18. Continue to use survey instruments to collect stakeholder input.