

COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT

Following is a link to the Lewis-Palmer School District communications audit performed by the Colorado Association of School Boards. The School District is now working to identify key priorities from the information obtained by the communications audit, and to develop a plan to address those concerns.

UPDATE

Most of the information for this report was gathered in February and early March of 2007. Since then, the Lewis-Palmer School District and Board of Education have made numerous improvements to communications efforts, many of them specifically recommended in the audit report. These efforts include:

- Reactivating the Key Communicators group, which now has about 40 members representing a variety of interests throughout the community
- Work by the Board of Education to establish governance roles and to emphasize transparency in the decision making process
- Expanding opportunities for public discussion directly with the Superintendent
- Using the internet more actively to communicate timely news to staff and the community
- Mailing information directly to families impacted by school district decisions
- Involving principals in primary decision making and at the first levels of communication
- Putting new emphasis on informational staff meetings and internal communications
- Expanding information in board agendas to provide greater public awareness of upcoming topics
- Empowering all board members to have ongoing and direct communication with the public and press

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Introduction

History

In January 2007, the Lewis-Palmer School District #38 board of education retained the Colorado Association of School Boards to conduct a communication audit to determine internal and external communications strengths and weaknesses and to provide recommendations for improvement.

The process

The CASB Communication Audit process for District 38 took place from February – May 2007 and included:

- a meeting with the district's public information officer to outline the process;
- a meeting with the district's communication advisory committee to outline the process;
- a meeting with the school board to discuss and answer questions about the process;
- ten 90-minute focus groups with representative staff, parent and community groups to assess the effectiveness of the district's communications efforts and to determine priorities for improvement;
- twenty-seven individual interviews with school board members, the superintendent, members of the superintendent's cabinet, the secretary to the board of education and media representatives,
- an online survey to determine the effectiveness of selected communication tools
- a review of, selected school district publications, the district's Web site and selected news releases produced by the district
- a review of the communication aspects of a regular school board meeting
- a detailed written report to the district including recommended actions for improvement
- presentation of the communication audit report at a board work session as well as a regular meeting of the school board

Focus group/interview procedures

In late February and early March, CASB conducted 10 focus groups and 27 individual interviews representing District teachers, administrators, school board members, classified staff, parents, community members without children in district schools and the news media. The focus group sessions were 90-minutes and interviews were approximately one hour in duration. Participants were asked a series of questions about the school district's internal and external communication efforts.

CASB staff facilitated the discussions, probing to gain participants' thoughts and feelings on a variety of school district issues.

Information gained in the focus group meetings and the individual interviews provides the framework upon which the recommendations are based.

Implications of focus group comments

Focus groups are not intended to provide statistically valid, quantitative data and therefore, hard data cannot be projected to the community as a whole.

Focus groups are, however, a widely accepted form of market research to provide qualitative information—a barometer of public opinion. Focus groups are an excellent way to probe people's perceptions of an organization. The information obtained by this process can enable the district board and staff to more realistically evaluate the attitudes among the staff and community and provides a basis for future planning.

Assessments identify problems

It should be noted that the nature of the communication audit process is to pinpoint problems in order to find solutions. Focus group participants are encouraged to vocalize their frustrations, therefore audit reports will often appear "negative" to the reader. The intent of this audit report is to reveal to the school district the perceptions of target groups and to recommend improvements to the district's communications program based on outside expert opinion and best practices.

Executive Summary

History

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Summary of audit findings

CLIMATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS

In order for a school district communication program to be successful, school leaders must be aware of the environment or "climate" in which they are communicating. The following are observations gained through the focus groups and interviews that explored Lewis-Palmer District 38's climate for communications. These must be considered as the district refines its communications plans.

Executive Summary – continued

1. The community is growing and changing from a small-town to a bedroom community and communication structures must change accordingly.
2. The community is highly educated, highly involved, but many do not have kids in school making communication a challenge.
3. Multiple leadership changes have unsettled the staff and caused mistrust.
4. Multiple controversies have eroded people's faith in the district.
5. Despite recent controversy, most staff and community members want to move forward.

DISTRICT REPUTATION

Strengths and distinguishing characteristics

The district was generally described as a high-achieving district serving advantaged students, although many pointed out the increasing diversity as the district grows. Some parent and community focus group participants noted that the district's long-term reputation of high achievement might have resulted in some complacency among the staff, and even the community, to strive for more success.

Recent controversies have tarnished the district's good reputation

When asked to describe the reputation of the school district, the immediate response from almost all focus group participants was, "historically or now?" In all groups, participants described Lewis-Palmer District 38 as a historically high-achieving, well-respected school district whose reputation has been tarnished by numerous recent controversies. Opinions expressed in the meetings ranged from "Let's stop wallowing in the controversy and get on with educating our kids" to "The school district better get it's act together soon" to "We need a new school board."

School board has been a focal point

In Lewis-Palmer District 38, the school board's actions have significantly affected people's image of the school district. Every focus group included some discussion about the school board without prompting from the facilitator. Conversations centered on the board's role, about whether or not it is able to work as a team, and about whether or not it is effectively performing its governance role.

There was also a strong desire that the board and top administration be more transparent in district communications. Transparency to focus group participants meant both *access to* information as well as a presentation of the "full picture" around district issues or initiatives.

Executive Summary – continued

COMMUNICATION TO THE COMMUNITY

Community feels that schools communicate well, but not district

When asked how effectively the school district communicates with the community, individual schools rated relatively high, but most people said the district does a poor job of communicating, particularly to those residents without children in school. Facilitators often heard comments from parents and community members like “They only communicate with me when they want to pass a tax election,” or “The district used to communicate well three superintendents ago.”

Residents without children in school say they get little to no information

Community members without children in school say they get little to no information from the schools or the district, except for when the district wants to pass a tax election. Those who are long-time residents said they used to get information from presentations made by the superintendent at service clubs, from being part of a key communicators network and from the district’s quarterly newsletter, which has now become an exclusively online publication. There is a perception among this group and among parents that all three of these communication efforts have been discontinued.

Relationship with the media

Interviews with representatives of four media outlets showed that media representatives generally perceive a good working relationship with the school district, but desire more transparency. They say the district’s public information officer has been helpful in directing them to the appropriate sources; however they do not always feel that those sources are forthcoming with information, particularly when the news story was on a sensitive or controversial issue.

COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF

Staff at all levels, except at the highest levels of the administration, said they feel ill informed about major school district issues and therefore cannot communicate factual district information to the public.

There was fairly widespread understanding among principals and teachers that they have a role in communicating about school district issues to the community. But, recent controversy and lack of information about the facts has caused most to shy away from communicating any district information to the community. At the same time that staff resists communicating about the district, parents and community members in the focus groups said district staff should be *primary* sources of information about the district.

Executive Summary—continued

Teachers

Teachers said that upheaval at the top levels of the organization has put top administrators in a reactive mode and that information on major issues is not being filtered down to the schools. They would like to rely on their principals for this type of information, however, most said that their principals either do not know, or are not communicating what they do know to teachers. Teachers also described many recent administrative changes at the central office, noting that they no longer know whom to go to get the information they need.

Classified staff

Similarly, the classified staff interviewed do not feel they get all the information they need from their superiors to communicate the entire story to the community. They said that often they only know what they read in the newspaper about district issues. “When you don’t get full information is when rumors start,” one classified staff member said.

Principals

Principals are key to effective communication and community support for any school district. Unfortunately, District 38 principals do not appear to be performing their essential function as communicators for the district. They said they feel a lack of support and focus from the board and superintendent. They also said they are embarrassed by “the bad PR” the district has exhibited over the last year and a half, and have felt the need to distance themselves and their schools from it.

In addition, it appears that a communication gap exists between central office administrators and principals. Principals feel there are no clear guidelines about who should communicate what—what principals should be communicating and what the central office should be communicating. As principals, they feel they should be part of district-level decision-making, but instead they often feel that the board and top administration only give the appearance that principals have been part of the process.

Assistant Principals and other administrators

This group clearly recognized their integral role in communicating but they yearn for a formalized communications system. They felt after the dust settles on the recent issues, a formalized communication system with talking points on specific issues could instill more confidence in administration at all levels in the school district

INFORMATION SOURCES

Focus group participants said their biggest source of information about the school district is word of mouth, although they acknowledged that the information was not always trustworthy.

Executive Summary—continued

Staff said they generally prefer to get school district information from their principals or directly from the central office, although some noted that their principals were not always good at passing information along to staff. Parent and community focus group participants said they often rely on the news media for information about the district because they don't get enough information directly from the school district itself.

An informal online survey conducted as part of the communication audit showed a strong preference among staff, parents and even community members without children in school to receive information e-mailed directly to them from the school district. It should be noted that those who completed the survey, completed it online and therefore are presumed to be comfortable with accessing information electronically. In focus group discussions, people were split on whether they preferred to receive information electronically. However, the idea of information sent *directly from the school district* was a solid theme in both the focus groups and the survey.

Complete survey results are contained in Appendix B (see attached document - Full Communications Audit Report.)

USE OF THE DISTRICT'S COMMUNICATION TOOLS

The school district's movement of most of its communication tools online was a source of disagreement in the focus groups. While we do not have statistically valid data, it appeared that roughly half of the participants enjoy and use the online communication tools and the other half resents the district's reliance on them. Generally, although not always, the older the person, the less likely they were to say they used the district's online communication tools.

DISTRICT'S METHODS FOR LISTENING TO STAFF AND THE PUBLIC

When asked what methods the district uses to listen to staff and community, most focus group participants could not list many. While a few administrators mentioned a survey of parents conducted by the district a couple of years ago, it appears that by and large the district does not have a planned two-way system of communication in place.

ADDITIONAL AUDIT COMPONENTS

In addition to the focus groups, interviews and informal survey, CASB reviewed and made recommendations on the communication aspects of a school board meeting, selected school district news releases, selected publications and the district's Web site. Information and recommendations on these specific items are contained in the full Communication Audit report.

Executive Summary – continued

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overarching theme through all focus groups and interviews was rebuilding trust. All focus groups touched on this theme in one way or another. Many are looking to the new superintendent to restore trust in the district, but this is a burden he cannot, and should not, shoulder alone. Everyone related to the district—the board, administration, staff, parents and the community—must take appropriate responsibility in restoring trust among the school district, its staff and the community.

District 38 is poised for a fresh start with a new superintendent, central office administrators in new or relatively new positions, and a full-time communications professional on board. Success will require a strategic, two-way communications plan, aimed at relationship-building, effective listening and consistent, transparent communication from the school district to its many publics. The plan should outline appropriate roles for the school board, the superintendent, the community relations manager and other appropriate staff members. It should also identify goals, strategies, timelines and budget.

A list of CASB's recommendations for the plan is contained in the full Communication Audit report. The recommendations are based on audit findings and should be combined with recommendations for the board meeting, publications and Web site presented elsewhere in this report.

Conclusion

Lewis-Palmer District #38 is to be commended for taking a hard look at improving its communication program. The recommendations contained in this report should provide a healthy start for improved communication in the district. CASB stands ready to further assist the district in these efforts.

Audit Findings

The following is a summary of findings from 10 focus groups, 27 interviews and online survey of the district's staff, school board, parents and community. The findings represent the major trends heard throughout the meetings and interviews.

CLIMATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS

In order for a school district communication program to be successful, school leaders must be aware of the environment or "climate" in which they are communicating. The following are observations gained through the focus groups and interviews that explored Lewis-Palmer District 38's climate for communications. These must be considered as the district refines its communications plans.

- 1. The community is growing and changing from a small-town to a bedroom community.** As District 38's community changes and grows, the school district should acknowledge that it must communicate in more planned and sophisticated ways than it has in the past. At the same time it must honor old traditions and school district history as it moves into the future. The recent addition of a full-time community relations manager to the staff provides an opportunity to implement a communication plan that is ongoing, comprehensive and two-way.
- 2. The community is highly educated, highly involved, but many do not have kids in school.** Focus group participants described the community as being a highly educated community in which a high percentage of people without children in school reside. National statistics often quoted state that about 70 percent of Americans do not have children in school. The percentage may be higher in District 38, but whether or not it is, it appears that the non-parent community has a very high level of interest in school district issues. This presents a communications opportunity for the district. The challenge will be reaching residents who no longer have children in school with a limited school district communications budget.
- 3. Multiple leadership changes have unsettled the staff.** The changes in superintendents in a relatively short amount of time, combined with numerous job changes in the central office has left staff unsure of the direction of the district, where they should obtain information, and what role they have in communicating. Further, the staff described the two prior superintendents as poor communicators and were reserving judgment on how well the current superintendent will communicate with them. Trust is an issue between the staff and upper-level administration.
- 4. Multiple controversies have eroded people's faith in the district.** The communications audit was conducted immediately after the district experienced several controversial issues. It appears that a solid communication structure and plan were not in place when multiple challenges hit, due to, in part, to the

superintendent changes and limited communication staffing (only a half-time communications position). People have not known where to obtain the truth about current issues and have relied on media reports and gossip for information.

- 5. Most want to move forward.** Despite the controversies, the general feeling during focus groups and interviews is that the staff and community want to move forward. Many expressed optimism that the new superintendent would provide fresh energy and a strong sense of direction for the school district.

DISTRICT REPUTATION

Strengths and distinguishing characteristics

The district was generally described as a high-achieving district serving advantaged students, although many pointed out the increasing diversity as the district grows. Some parent and community focus group participants noted that the district's long-term reputation of high achievement may have resulted in some complacency among the staff, and even the community, to strive for more success.

Focus group participants identified a number of particular strengths of the school district, which included:

- High CSAP scores
- High achieving students
- High level of community involvement
- High-quality teachers
- Relatively small size
- School safety
- A commitment to the arts
- High quality special education program

What sets District 38 apart?

“We need to set some stretch goals—it’s kind of like the same old, same old. We need the board and superintendent to come up with an exciting new vision.” —parent

Despite a widespread belief among focus group participants that District 38 is a high-quality school district, when asked to identify what characteristics set District 38 apart from other districts, most focus group participants found it difficult to come up with an answer. This may be because District 38 is situated among some other high-performing school districts. It may also be because public school districts have not been accustomed to marketing themselves by calling out their district's strengths in relation to others.

When encouraged to answer, participants most often identified the district's small size, small-community feel and high level of parent/community involvement as unique characteristics.

Recent controversies have tarnished the district's good reputation

"Recent events have soured lots of people on the school district." —parent

When asked to describe the reputation of the school district, the immediate response from almost all focus group participants was, "historically or now?" In all groups, participants described Lewis-Palmer District 38 as a historically high-achieving, well-respected school district whose reputation has been tarnished by numerous recent controversies. Opinions expressed in the meetings ranged from "Let's stop wallowing in the controversy and get on with educating our kids" to "The school district better get it's act together soon" to "We need a new school board."

Staff often expressed embarrassment about the district's current reputation and made comments indicating that they are trying to distance themselves from the central office administration and school board. Many teachers, classified staff members, and even principals, made comments such as, "I just keep my head down and focus on my school and try not to let this affect the kids."

Long-time district residents were particularly troubled by recent events, noting that the district had previously had a great reputation and worked hard to reach out to the community at large. They feel the district is now reactive in its communication efforts and recent events have made communication to the community almost nonexistent.

School board has been a focal point

"We're not presenting ourselves in the best light." —school board member

In Lewis-Palmer District 38, the school board's actions have significantly affected people's image of the school district. Every focus group included some discussion about the school board without prompting from the facilitator. Conversations centered on the board's role, about whether or not it is able to work as a team, and about whether or not it is effectively performing its governance role.

Many described the board as a collection of well-meaning individuals who do not understand how to function as a school board. When interviewed, some of the board members themselves presented this same point of view. Focus group participants often mentioned that the board's lack of unity has undermined the credibility of the school district. They expressed frustration with—and sometimes embarrassment about—school board members' public disagreements with each other.

There was also a widespread perception among the staff and the community that the board has stepped too far into the domain of staff. Many expressed the fear that the board will not let the new superintendent do his job.

Focus group participants often said that while individual members have communicated with them, they felt that the board as a whole is not willing to communicate and not willing to listen to staff and the public. They listed a number of reasons why they have this notion. Perceptions commonly heard in the focus groups included:

- Board agendas do not clearly present to the public what the board will be discussing.
- The public does not have access to board minutes.
- The board meets too often in executive session. Some said executive sessions are held in conjunction with every board meeting.
- Some board meetings are held in the superintendent's office, giving the impression the meetings are closed to the public.
- Audience input on major issues has often been placed toward the end of the board agenda, thereby causing many who wanted to speak to leave before the agenda item was addressed.

Focus group participants often said that when the pressure is on, the board communicates less when it should be communicating more. They also believe the board communicates reactively when it should be communicating proactively.

There was also a strong desire that the board and top administration be more transparent in district communications. Transparency to focus group participants meant both *access to* information as well as a presentation of the “full picture” around district issues or initiatives. There was a strong desire that the district provide the public easier access to information. In addition, staff and community focus group participants wanted district leaders to better communicate to the public about the challenges the district faces. Facilitators heard many comments like, “Show us what you are wrestling with. Don’t just present the good news.”

Staff and community focus group participants also want the board to move past the current controversy and the disagreements among members to develop and clearly articulate a strategic vision for the school district. Despite the feelings about the board that were expressed during focus groups, it was clear that the overriding sentiment of most of the community and staff was one of moving forward.

COMMUNICATION TO THE COMMUNITY

“The district can say as much as it wants to say. Until the community believes we are telling the truth, the volumes don’t make a difference. Actions must precede words.”
—school board member

Community feels that schools communicate well, but not district

“If we ignore teachers as a way to pass along information to the community, we are really missing an opportunity.”—parent

When asked how effectively the school district communicates with the community, individual schools rated relatively high, but most people said the district does a poor job of communicating, particularly to those residents without children in school. Facilitators often heard comments from parents and community members like “They only communicate with me when they want to pass a tax election,” or “The district used to communicate well three superintendents ago.”

Parents, particularly at the elementary level, said they rely on their children’s teachers or other school employees for most of their information about the school, but say they get very little information about the district. They worry that the central office is not passing along information to the principals who could then relay the information to the teachers and parents.

Principals and teachers agree. They said they get very little information from the central office and that the information they do get is often changed mid-course. Many admitted that they very rarely pass district information on to the community.

Residents without children in school say they get little to no information

“The feeling I get is that there is an air of secrecy about the district.”
—community member with no children in the district

Community members without children in school say they get little to no information from the schools or the district, except for when the district wants to pass a tax election. Those who are long-time residents said they used to get information from presentations made by the superintendent at service clubs, from being part of a key communicators network and from the district’s quarterly newsletter, which has now become an exclusively online publication. There is a perception among this group and among parents that all three of these communication efforts have been discontinued.

In addition, many in the empty nesters focus group desired more personal interaction with the schools through use of the buildings or adult education opportunities. “If you want us to build buildings, let seniors come in and use them,” one person said.

Participants in the business leaders focus group were equally concerned about the district's communication with non-parents. "If we don't find a way to communicate with them, nothing will pass," said one participant, speaking about bond and mill levy ballot issues.

Relationship with the media

"There was a lot of information I know the district could not give people, but there was information that could have been given that would have explained why they could not disclose the information." —reporter

Interviews with representatives of four media outlets showed that media representatives generally perceive a good working relationship with the school district, but desire more transparency. They say the district's public information officer has been helpful in directing them to the appropriate sources; however they do not always feel that those sources are forthcoming with information, particularly when the news story was on a sensitive or controversial issue.

Although they realize there are issues that the school district may not be able to legally comment on, they feel that the district could do a better job of explaining *why* comments cannot be made. Some reporters mentioned disagreements with the school district over what is public information and expressed frustration at being required to file formal requests for information they think should be readily available.

Further, media representatives said the district is not as aggressive as it could be in presenting story ideas to promote the positive aspects of the district. One reporter said his/her newspaper would like to print positive news stories about the district, but do not receive press releases informing them of district successes.

These findings are important as the district considers the kind of media coverage it wishes to enjoy. While the media is not in business to present the school district in a positive light, reporters are much more apt to cover feature stories as well as hard news when they do not perceive requests for information to be a struggle. In general, when a level of trust is built between the school district and the reporter, the school district generally has more opportunity to present its side of the story.

Analysis of selected news releases

The district provided five news releases for CASB review. The following are recommendations regarding these selections.

1. *Lewis-Palmer School District #38 Honors Former Superintendent Pomarico's Request for Privacy – April 26, 2007*
 - The announcement of Raymond Blanch being named as the new superintendent was buried in the news release. The news release should have led with the new superintendent and mentioned the “request for privacy” information.
 - The board president’s quote regarding the “gentleman’s agreement,” in hindsight, was a statement that contributed to the controversy surrounding the superintendent’s resignation.

2. *Lewis-Palmer School District #38 Finalizes Second High School Site, Begins Preparing for Bond Campaign – August 7, 2006*
 - This release was well-written and straightforward.

3. *Lewis-Palmer School District #38 Names Michael G. Pomarico Ed.D as New Superintendent—March 2, 2006*
 - This release was well-written and straightforward.

4. *The Mayor's 100 Teens—September 22, 2006*
 - The headline should have made it clear that District #38 students were being honored.
 - A paragraph about why each student was honored, what school they attend, and their grade level would have added interest to the release.

5. *Lewis-Palmer School District #38 Releases Third Grade CSAP Reading Scores—May 3, 2006*
 - The headline of the news release should have promoted the fact that District #38 is one of the state’s highest performing school districts.
 - Some of the quotes by administrators contained educational jargon that may have been confusing to the reader.

COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF

“We don’t need to know everything. We just need to know what we need to know and what to say.”—teacher

Staff at all levels, except at the highest levels of the administration, said they feel ill-informed about major school district issues and therefore cannot communicate factual district information to the public.

There was fairly widespread understanding among principals and teachers that they have a role in communicating about school district issues to the community. But, most said that, lately, they have not been viewed by top administrators or the school board as district-level communicators. Further, recent controversy and lack of information about the facts has caused most to shy away from communicating any district information to the community.

Staff said that there is a lot of information coming to them from the district—so much that they have trouble prioritizing it. However, they said the information they get is mostly day-to-day operational information and they don’t get enough information about the big, important issues that they should be helping to communicate externally.

At the same time that staff resists communicating about the district, parents and community members in the focus groups said district staff should be *primary* sources of information about the district. National communication research bears this out. Most studies show district staff—and particularly classified staff and teachers—as the most credible spokespeople for school districts in any community. It is critical for districts to assure that staff members are informed, positively motivated and speaking with one clear voice about the school district.

Teachers

“We as teachers need to understand the power that our voice carries.”—teacher

Some teachers said they unknowingly feed into negative communication about contentious issues because they are not equipped with the facts they need. Some teachers, they say, have been vocally negative about the school district.

Teachers said that upheaval at the top levels of the organization have put top administrators in a reactive mode and that information on major issues is not being filtered down to the schools. They would like to rely on their principals for this type of information, however, most said that their principals either do not know, or are not communicating what they do know to teachers.

Teachers also described many recent administrative changes at the central office, noting that they no longer know who to go to to get the information they need. In

contrast, teachers feel they do a very good job of communicating with parents on student or school topics.

Classified staff

Similarly, the classified staff interviewed do not feel they get all the information they need from their superiors to communicate the entire story to the community. They said that often they only know what they read in the newspaper about district issues. “When you don’t get full information is when rumors start,” one classified staff member said.

In focus group discussions, school secretaries did not immediately view themselves as district communicators despite their central role in the communication process. As the conversation continued, they started to see their role as communicators, but said they could communicate well only if they had good, clear information to relay to the community.

Principals

“In an ideal district, you’d have a shared collective message that we helped develop and would help communicate. That conversation doesn’t exist here.” —principal

Principals are key to effective communication and community support for any school district. Principals are the link between district decision-makers and staff who are the district’s key communicators to the public. They are trusted sources of information for staff and community and help “interpret” staff and parent needs to district administration and the board. In many ways, they are the face of the district, particularly with parents.

Unfortunately, District 38 principals do not appear to be performing their essential function as communicators for the district. They said they feel a lack of support and focus from the board and superintendent. They also said they are embarrassed by “the bad PR” the district has exhibited over the last year and a half, and have felt the need to distance themselves and their schools from it.

Principals say they try to shield their staffs from “what’s going on at the district,” but it is getting hard to do. They noted that staff hears information from all over, and often directly from the central office before the principals do. Principals said they would like to think that the district’s current environment was not affecting their schools, and some felt that they had shielded their schools from it. However, as one noted, “I’m not sure how long this stuff can sit on your shoulders without affecting the schools.”

In addition, it appears that a communication gap exists between central office administrators and principals. Principals feel there are no clear guidelines about who should communicate what—what principals should be communicating and what the central office should be communicating. Further, they said, they lack information about important district issues, and therefore cannot communicate adequately with their staffs—and many staff focus group participants would agree. According to principals, constant reorganizing of the central office over the last few years has made it unclear

who to call for information. “As a principal, I don’t know who to call, so I don’t,” was a comment made in the focus groups. In contrast, central office administrators feel that they *have* been communicating with principals and that principals have been told who does what in the administration building.

Principals described themselves as a group in “hunker-down mode,” noting they feel little to no direction, support or respect from the central office. They say they focus only on their schools and rely only on each other for information and support. As principals, they feel they should be part of district-level decision-making, but instead they often feel that the board and top administration only give the appearance that principals have been part of the process.

Assistant Principals and other administrators

This group clearly recognized their intricate role in communicating but they yearn for a formalized communications system. “This is not a job,” one said. “It’s a lifestyle.” “But,” this person went on to say, “I’ve gotten really good at apologizing (for the district).”

They felt after the dust settles on the recent issues, a formalized communication system with talking points on specific issues could instill more confidence in administration at all levels in the school district. “Right now, I don’t know of a district-level source of credible information,” one said.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Focus group participants said their biggest source of information about the school district is word of mouth, although they acknowledged that the information was not always trustworthy.

Staff said they generally prefer to get school district information from their principals or directly from the central office, although some noted that their principals were not always good at passing information along to staff. Staff also said that too often they hear district information from someone in the community or read it in the newspaper before it is communicated to them by their school or the district.

Parent and community focus group participants said they often rely on the news media for information about the district because they don’t get enough information directly from the school district itself.

An informal online survey conducted as part of the communication audit showed a strong preference among staff, parents and even community members without children in school to receive information e-mailed directly to them from the school district. It should be noted that those who completed the survey, completed it online and therefore are presumed to be comfortable with accessing information electronically. In focus group discussions, and particularly the focus group of empty nesters/ seniors, people

were split on whether they preferred to receive information electronically. Some also expressed the fear that with too much e-mail communication, it would be difficult to determine priority information. However, the idea of information sent *directly from the school district* was a solid theme in both the focus groups and the survey.

Staff, parents and non-parents who completed the survey expressed a strong desire for more in-depth information about issues the school board is discussing, with 80% of respondents selecting it as a “type of information that interests you most.” Running closely behind are information on the strategic vision of the school district (58%) and information about the school district’s budget (56%). Seventy-seven percent of parent survey respondents said they are interested in “information about what is being taught in schools.”

When asked how well informed they felt about specific district issues or initiatives, survey respondents were least informed about the health of the school district’s budget, future district funding issues, the strategic vision for the school district, and the school board’s role in the district. They were most informed about the status of Palmer Ridge High School and efforts to maintain high academic achievement.

Complete survey results are contained in Appendix B (see attached document - Full Communications Audit Report.)

USE OF THE DISTRICT’S COMMUNICATION TOOLS

The school district’s movement of most of its communication tools online was a source of disagreement in the focus groups. While we do not have statistically valid data, it appeared that roughly half of the participants enjoy and use the online communication tools and the other half resents the district’s reliance on them. Generally, although not always, the older the person, the less likely they were to say they used the district’s online communication tools.

The Update, Community Newsletter

There was much confusion expressed in focus groups about the *The Update* community newsletter. Many were under the impression that the school district no longer publishes its community newsletter, when in fact, it has been moved to an exclusively online publication. Most did not know that they had to sign up online to receive the newsletter directly from the district.

Both parents and non-parents said they used to rely on this publication for school district information before it went online. Most participants in the “empty nesters” focus group, strongly urged the district to return to printing the district newsletter and direct-mailing it to homes—even at a high cost to the district. They viewed this newsletter as an investment in communicating with the district’s “non-parent” population.

Even for those who said they prefer online communication, they generally prefer it for shorter bits of information through e-mail, rather than long newsletter articles.

The survey showed that 68% of all respondents and 65% of parents said they at least sometimes read *The Update*. Seventy-one percent of staff said they at least sometimes read it. However, only 40% of non-parents said they read the publication with another 40% saying they seldom or never read it. (This may be because the publication has been moved online.)

Community News

Focus group participants said they appreciate the inclusion of *Community News* in the Tri-Lakes Tribune. However, most participants agreed it should be a harder-hitting publication that focuses on the district's successes and challenges. They said if the district was more willing to share this information they would seem more transparent.

Fifty-nine percent of all survey respondents and 65% of parents said they at least sometimes read *Community News*. A full 81% of non-parents said they at least sometimes read *Community News* with 43% saying they "always" read it. Only 51% of staff read *Community News* with 23% saying they "never" read it. Note the recommendations for *Community News* on page 25.

District Web site

Most focus group participants said they at least sometimes use the District 38 Web site to get district or school information, although not all agreed that the Web site was helpful. Focus group participants often said they would access the Web site more if it contained more timely and transparent information such as information about board meetings and board action. Many in the empty nesters/seniors focus group said they did not use the Web site at all.

Seventy-nine percent of all survey respondents said they at least sometimes rely on the district's Web site for information, with 75% of staff using it, 89% of parents using it and 66% of non-parents using it. It is notable that 24% of non-parent respondents and 21% of staff respondents said they seldom use the district's Web site.

Calendar information tops the list of information most people are looking for when they visit the Web site (70%), with 65% looking for district news, 54% looking for information on individual schools and 42% looking for information on board meetings or board action. Non-parents rated information on board meetings or board action the highest, with 80% listing it as information they are looking for when they visit the district's Web site.

See a full analysis and recommendations on district publications and the Web site beginning on page 27.

What people want more information about (in priority order)

- In-depth information about issues the school board is discussing
- Information on the strategic vision of the school district
- Information about the school district's budget
- Information about what is being taught in schools

DISTRICT'S METHODS FOR LISTENING TO STAFF AND THE PUBLIC

"What does the district fear? They seem to be afraid."

—Business community

When asked what methods the district uses to listen to staff and community, most focus group participants could not list many. While a few administrators mentioned a survey of parents conducted by the district a couple of years ago, it appears that by and large the district does not have a planned two-way system of communication in place.

Staff and community participants did not perceive the school board, as a unit, as a good listener, although individual members were often perceived as good listeners. Many pointed to the lead-up to the ballot issue on the new high school as an instance where the board tried to listen to the community but did not handle the process in such a way that the listening was helpful. In fact, many said this effort hurt the board's credibility.

The superintendent's coffees, which were being held during the time of the focus groups, were seen as a hopeful sign by many community focus group participants who had generally adopted a "wait-and-see" attitude. Many in the teachers focus groups felt positive about the new superintendent's visits to their schools and were hopeful that he would turn out to be a good listener.

On the other hand, staff generally felt that district leaders as whole are not interested in listening to them. Some staff focus group participants mentioned they have tried to follow the "chain of command" by taking comments to their respective superiors, but they often feel this is ineffective because they don't hear back from anyone or see any results.

Board Meeting Review and Recommendations

The school board meeting is one way the board and top administrators communicate with the staff and the public. While it is a relatively small part of an overall communication plan, it sends a message about the board and the school district to the staff, students and community who attend the meeting.

A CASB consultant reviewed the board meeting held on March 15, 2007 for its communication potential. The following are observations and recommendations.

What's working:

- The board agenda and wrap-around piece is well done, it is clear, sends a welcoming message and is easy to read. The acronyms section is very helpful.
- The meeting was conducted in a professional environment. The amount of seating was adequate, atmosphere comfortable, and the sound and A/V systems worked well. The environment sent the message that the board was there to do important business.
- The board made it clear that they value students by having student presentations at the beginning of the meeting.
- All board members exhibited good listening skills and demonstrated that they valued the speakers' reports and citizen comments that were made to the board.

Recommendations:

- Consider adding a little more detail on what is being discussed to the board agenda. Add job titles of the presenters and the organization they are from if not district staff.
- The meeting space did not include a visible display of the board's mission and goals. Use the space above both doorways to prominently display the District 38 Core Purpose and the District 38 Core Values. This focuses the audience's eyes on the board's big picture.
- Consider revisiting the seating arrangement for principals. While the chairs in front of the board send the message that principals are a valued part of the team and allows the board easy access to principals if they have questions, the placement of the chairs makes it almost impossible for the audience to see the board. Consider placing principals' chairs on either side of the board table, leaving an open space in the middle of the arrangement so the audience can see. (The result would look like a large horseshoe rather than the current oval.)
- While the audience introductions section sends a message that the community is welcome, it may become unwieldy and time consuming if there are lots of people in the audience. If the board generally allows audience introduction and then discontinues them when the crowd is large, this sends an unintended negative message. Consider a general welcoming statement by the board president. The

board and superintendent should also consider taking about 10 minutes or so to walk around and personally welcome people before the meeting begins.

- The tension among board members was apparent during the board reports section. Members should try to minimize curt interactions with each other as it reinforces the public's concerns that board members are not working as a team.
- The meeting was lengthy. While staff and student reports are important, is there a way to spread reports from staff and others among more board meetings? The board may want to consider putting time limits on agenda items.

Written Communications Analysis and Recommendations

Community members are bombarded daily by information, so written and electronic communication should address readers' needs quickly and clearly to compete well for their attention. The general rule for effective written and electronic communication is to keep it short, simple and to-the-point.

The Lewis-Palmer School District produces concise, consistent, informative publications. However, the school district can save time and money and increase the value of its publications by decreasing their size and making them available in more strategic locations frequented by the non-parent community.

Make the most of publications by making clear the purpose of each newsletter and titling it accordingly. Currently, District 38 publication titles overlap each other and local newspaper titles enough to confuse readers as to which publication they are reading and where the message originated. As long as each publication "looks" like it comes from Lewis-Palmer, it is okay to give publications a number of different, and descriptive names. This way, the reader will know what they are going to read about from the title and they'll know exactly where it came from.

The following are comments and recommendations on the examples of written communication the school district submitted for review.

The Update

What's working:

- Easy-to-read layout. Good use of white space and clustered articles make it clear where the reader should go next.
- Prints out from the Web site nicely. Since it is exclusively online, being able to print it out in an easy-to-read format is critical.

Recommendations:

- Shorten the newsletter so everything in the Table of Contents is a "Special point of interest." This increases the likelihood your constituents will read it.
- This publication is exclusively online. Maximize readership by printing out copies on good-quality paper in school colors and distribute it at community gathering places like coffee shops, restaurants, libraries and the Monument Hill Sertoma Club. Make them available to all community influencers.
- Rotate information about each school as well as the entire school district. The newsletter should reflect what's going on in the entire school district, not just the administrative office.

- Liven up the report by including short quotes from teachers and administrative personnel.
- Consider changing the name of this publication so that it is not confused with the Superintendent's Update.

Community News

What's working:

- In general, the information the district provides in Community News appears useful to community members.
- Including Community News in the local newspaper gives all community members a vehicle to learn about the Lewis Palmer School District. It brings the information to them, instead of making them come to the district for information.

Recommendations:

- At first glance this publication provides a large amount of text to take in. Increase the likelihood this publication is read by making it easier to read and print out online. Shorten all stories to quick clips. Direct people online to learn more. Break it up visually as well, so it looks less overwhelming.
- Create order on the page. Provide a table of contents so people know what they are going to read, and so they can choose what to read if they don't have much time.
- Move "Hats off to . . ." articles to a more internal publication. While these kudos add to staff morale, the information included in this public newsletter should be focused on major district initiatives that affect student achievement and taxpayer dollars.
- Continue to split the news page between positive news and hard-hitting news. Focus group participants clearly stated they wanted both kinds of information. Most of all, they wanted to feel the school district was talking about both the district's challenges as well as successes.
- Consider changing the title of this publication as it conflicts with the title of Our Community News, a local newspaper.

Stakeholder's Report

What's working:

- Easy to read. Good use of "white space" makes every item more readable and doesn't overwhelm the reader.
- Great use of quotes and labels to support the Annual Report content. Make sure all quotes are attributed to someone (e.g. superintendent, teacher, custodian . . .)
- Good use of photos to break up the text. Focus photos on pictures of children in school, contributing to the public in any way. For instance, in the Our Kids Care

section, include a photo of kids participating in the food drive. Photos of the back of a school bus or windmill are not as useful as ones that support your student achievement mission and focus.

- Graphs are clear and understandable.

Recommendations:

- Ensure the Stakeholder’s Report piques the interest of both parents and non-parents. For instance, the invitation to all stakeholders to visit the schools is buried. There is also no mention of volunteer opportunities. The “Our Kids Care” section is a great addition, but should be featured more, so non-parents know the positive affect students have on the community.
- Move the section on “Ways we stay in touch” to a more significant location within the report. Call it “Ways to learn more about LPSD throughout the year.” Right now it looks like a long laundry list. Focus on the newsletters that provide community members with the information they need to know and note where community members can find them. Mention opportunities for them to be involved in the district.
- Consider changing the report title from ‘Expect the Best’ to something more descriptive. You may consider a simple descriptive title like, “Stakeholder’s Report” or something more recognizable to the average community member—“Annual Report to Our Community Stakeholders.” ‘Expect the Best’ or ‘reflecting the greatest potential of every student’ can certainly be a theme throughout the report, but the point of the report needs to be clear on the cover.
- Decrease the number of pages. Less information increases the likelihood people will read it.
- To the extent the district is legally able, include captions under the photos, so readers know who they are looking at and what they are doing.
- Consider adding more quotes from satisfied parents and dedicated teachers to humanize the report.
- Make sure to describe such terms as “highly qualified teachers.” Not everyone knows what it means to reach that status. They may think, “Well, shouldn’t all teachers be highly qualified?”
- The welcome messages at the front of the Stakeholder’s Report are from the superintendent and the board president. To unite the entire school district, consider “A Message from the Lewis-Palmer School District,” not just the administrative team. Also, consider having the message come from the Board of Education signed by the entire board with a photo of the entire board.

Web Site Analysis and Recommendations

The following are general comments and recommendations regarding the Lewis-Palmer School District Web site at <http://www.lewispalmer.org/>:

Lewis-Palmer School District clearly understands the value of a good Web site, as it is obvious staff members spent time and energy creating quality online content. Because of this effort, the District 38 Web site is poised to be an even more powerful tool for the district. However, the crux of any good Web site is the accessibility of the information contained on it.

Unlike hard-copy publications, Web sites have unlimited space and often there is no tangible price tag on adding information to the site. Therefore, Web sites like District 38's are often bogged down with too much information. Over-communication can be as frustrating as under-communication when a Web site visitor is looking for specific information.

Unlike the nuanced changes in intonation and facial expressions in face-to-face communication, written communications like Web sites are read only in the mood of the reader. This adds a level of variability to written communication. That is why the Web site should provide information that is as transparent as possible. For instance, a person who visits the Web site to learn more about the new high school may perceive the absence of an opening paragraph explaining the issue as unfriendly and cagey. This attitude reflects some concerns from focus groups participants.

Focus group participants also expressed concern that the school district relies too much on the Web site when connecting with the 70 percent of the community that does not have children in the schools. Although, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the Internet-use growth rate for adults over 50 is outpacing that for young adults, it is important to offer many modes of communication to your non-parents. Because both modes of communication are equally important, it is crucial for District 38 to use the same amount of care and thought when connecting with both parents and non-parents via the Internet as they do when they meet with them in person. Otherwise, Web site visitors may leave your Web site frustrated with unanswered questions.

Consider some of the following Web site successes and challenges.

GENERAL DISTRICT 38 WEB SITE

What's working:

- Weather-related school closure information spotlighted on the home page offers visitors a quick way to access emergency or timely information.
- Artwork showcased on the Web site shows your commitment to children and your art programs.

- Including important information on the homepage, like the superintendent's name and areas the districts serves, helps current and potential family members quickly learn more about the district.
- The simply labeled "Feedback" area allows visitors to inform you of Web site issues and gives them an outlet to ask questions.

Recommendations:

Simplify the homepage.

- Currently, the homepage displays 21 hyperlinks fairly prominently. Clear the clutter by reducing the number of links on the page. Consider emulating other Web sites that put the horizontal navigation bar in small print at the bottom of the homepage.
- Swap the "Recently added information" with the student artwork. Even though student artwork is an important addition to the Web site, most often people visit the Web site to gather information.
- Consolidate the left navigation bar by moving the Board of Education under "About LPSD."
- Update the Search function. For instance, if you search "Monument Academy" and "Creekside Middle," you receive no results even though the school names are listed a few times throughout the Web site.
- Weather-related school closure information on the homepage is critical and a great addition to the site. Make it easier to locate by prominently labeling it on the left side of the information bar.

Make the Web site friendlier and warmer.

- Add a photo of the superintendent to the superintendent page. Focus group participants and interviewees applauded the superintendent's efforts to connect with the community through community coffees. Increasing his visibility, even through the Web site, makes him more accessible and more a part of the community.
- Consider the length of time it takes to download PDFs. These time-eaters can frustrate Web site visitors. Instead, put the information directly on a Web site page.
- Make the Second High School Initiative page more informative and friendly. Add an introductory paragraph briefly describing the project, its goals and its current stage of operation. Then provide descriptive titles for the links, so people know what they'll find when they click on them.
- Either remove or rebuild the "Citizens comments at school board meetings" area. Could this information be added to the school board minutes already included on the Web site?
- Board meeting minutes are available online. However, most focus groups participants claimed they were not. Calling them "Board Meeting Highlights" is

confusing and possibly sends a message that some issues are highlighted and some are omitted. Change the title to “Board Minutes” so it is obvious what they are.

- Committees page—Include a short description of each committee’s responsibility and who sits on the committee (staff, community members, etc.) so, even if there are no links underneath the heading, there’s a description.
- Continually check all Web site links. Some, even on the second level of the navigation bar, do not work. (There are numerous products available via the Web that will search broken links for you.)

Make navigation bar headings clear and succinct.

- Cutting out even one word from a navigation bar can make a Web site easier to navigate. For instance, simplifying “Parent Connections” to “Parents” sends an even clearer message to parents who might be confused by the word “Connections.” Parents will still understand where to go, with less to read and virtually no confusion. This also gives the Parents section more room to grow.
- Describe navigation bars in layman’s terms. Do your Web site visitors know what Administrative Services, General Services, Special Services and Accountability mean?
- Clarify what the PLS Calendar is. If it’s a calendar for the school district, call it “Calendar” or “District calendar.”
- The Special Services page includes the theme “All Standards for all students.” Is this a necessary addition or will the district’s main theme be enough?

Connect with non-parents.

- Include an area (with navigation button) for the 70 percent of the community without children in school. When you meet with them on a one-on-one basis, you can send them to this area of the Web site. This welcoming area ensures they won’t have to search for what they need to know.
- Under this button you could include ways to volunteer, school district news, etc.—a mini-Web site. This way the visitor doesn’t have to explore the entire Web site to find what they need.

INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL WEB SITES

What’s working:

- School Web sites are relatively consistent in content and layout. This allows families with kids in multiple schools to more easily find the information they need in the same place in each Web site.
- Schools have made a concerted effort to make their Web sites friendly and approachable.

- Each District 38 school has a Web site and all of them provide the most important information to their constituents.

Recommendations:

Not all District 38 schools are directly addressed in this review. Each site has its strengths and areas where it can be improved. The recommendations mentioned in “All sites” applies to every site.

General Schools site

- Call out Monument Academy as a charter school and indicate what grades it serves.

All school sites

- The word “Accountability” does not explain the information one would find on the succeeding Web page. Make it more descriptive so community members clearly understand what they will find there.
- Simplify the staff directory names by excluding the school name in front of each name. Less text often means less frustration and easier navigation.

Lewis Palmer High School

- The LPHS mission page is open-ended and trails off. This may be confusing to visitors.

Lewis Palmer Middle School

- The title “Staff Web pages” implies only staff should visit those pages. However, upon investigation, the area is also clearly for parents to gather useful information like school newsletters. Change the title of the navigation button, so parents know to visit that area. Also, when parents click on the button, include a paragraph on what parents will find in that area.
- Again, simplify the left navigation bar by calling it “Parents” instead of “Parent Connection.”

Monument Academy

- Include a “Schools” button on the page just as the other school sites did, so visitors can return to the list of district schools.
- Include the District 38 logo in the top right-hand corner of the Web page just as other school sites did. This signifies the school’s connection to the district.

Prairie Winds Elementary

- Use the same typeface for the entire Web site to create consistency and clarity.

- Update the Activities/Programs page. It contains useful information that is difficult to find. Programs listed on the page would benefit from one sentence describing the program. This way, parents don't have to click on every link to find what they need.

Palmer Lake Elementary

- Make "Attention to all PLES visitors" a link instead of making them click on a "more info" link. This increases the likelihood visitors will read it.
- It is also unclear on this Web site what the Staff Web page is for. There is information for both parents and students, but that's not clear from the navigation bar description. Select a descriptive name for the navigation button and on the actual page include a paragraph describing the information on the page.

Opportunities, Challenges And Recommendations

The overarching theme through all focus groups and interviews was rebuilding trust. All focus groups touched on this theme in one way or another, whether it was staff's lack of trust in the central office, the community's and staff's lack of trust in the school board or the school board members' lack of trust in each other.

Many are looking to the new superintendent to restore trust in the district, but this is a burden he cannot, and should not, shoulder alone. Everyone related to the district—the board, administration, staff, parents and the community—must take appropriate responsibility in restoring trust among the school district, its staff and the community.

District 38 is poised for a fresh start with a new superintendent, central office administrators in new or relatively new positions, and a full-time communications professional on board. Success will require a strategic, two-way communications plan, aimed at relationship-building, effective listening and consistent, transparent communication from the school district to its many publics. The plan should outline appropriate roles for the school board, the superintendent, the community relations manager and other appropriate staff members. It should also identify goals, strategies, timelines and budget.

CASB offers the following recommendations as the district develops its strategic communication plan. These recommendations are based on audit-findings and should be combined with recommendations for the board meeting, publications and Web site presented on previous pages of this report.

Recommendations:

1. Establish appropriate roles for school district communications, along with behaviors that contribute to effective communications

A. Recommendations for the school board:

- Seek training or guidance on the board's governance role in the district and work toward becoming a governance team.
- Refrain from public discourse about the relationship among individual board members.
- Focus the board's time on engaging the community in developing a strategic vision for the district.
- Convene meetings to listen to the public as a unit. Individuals should bring the information gained from significant interactions with the staff or community to the board as a whole.
- Board communications and key messages should center around its strategic vision and goals and board policy matters.

- Agree on an appropriate spokesperson for the board on policy matters; district staff should speak for the district on day-to-day and or management issues.
- Focus on transparency regarding meetings, agendas and board minutes.
 - > Announce meetings as early as possible, and make agendas clearly and readily available on the district’s Web site in a timely manner. Send notice of meetings and a link to meeting minutes directly to staff and key communicators via e-mail.
 - > Minimize the number of executive sessions that must be called and hold all board meetings in locations that are perceived as public places.
 - > Consider publishing a brief report after every board meeting, written in layman’s terms. This report should be available on the Web site as well as distributed by e-mail to staff and key communicators.

B. Recommendations for the Superintendent and Community Relations Manager:

- CASB recommends that the community relations manager play a counselor role and be part of the superintendent’s cabinet. This communications professional will be key to the development and implementation of the district’s communications plan. (See What Does/Can a School Public Relations Professional Do For a District?, Appendix A on Page 42.)
- Develop a district spokesperson procedure for external communications. In some districts, the community relations professional is the primary spokesperson for the district. In others, the community relations professional is the coordinator, seeking the most appropriate spokesperson for each issue. The important thing is that the district develop a procedure and communicate it to the board, district-level administrators, principals and the news media.
- Assure that the district’s strategic communication plan addresses internal, as well as external communications.

2. Develop priority messages

For effective communication, less is often more. The district’s community relations manager, along with the superintendent’s cabinet and some representation from the school board, should develop 2-3 main messages that relate to the district’s strategic vision. These messages should be the main focus of all communication for a period of time—perhaps a year or two—then new messages should be created. This does *not* mean that the school district will not communicate beyond the messages or that the district is attempting to “spin” information. It *does* mean that the staff and community will know the priorities and focus of the district’s leadership and the direction in which the district is headed.

- A. Use the district's strategic plan as a guide for determining priority messages and link these messages to what focus group/interview participants desire more information about. (See box on page 21.)
- B. Assure that the board, district spokespeople and principals are aware of the messages and use them in communicating both internally and externally.

3. Internal communication must be immediate focus

The effectiveness of a district's internal communication directly affects the district's ability to communicate well externally. Community members look to principals, teachers and classified staff for information about the school district. In the absence of trustworthy information, they rely on gossip.

- A. Rebuild trust between central office and principals.
 - The superintendent should meet with school principals on a regular basis to clarify issues and build relationships. Plenty of time should be allocated to the superintendent listening to principals' ideas and concerns.
 - Organize principals' meetings so they are focused on timely and relevant district issues. Carve out significantly more time for two-way communication so principals can ask questions and truly understand the issues at hand.
 - Develop a brief weekly Leadership Memo that is distributed electronically to all district administrators. The memo should contain information on key decisions and initiatives, timelines, where to go for more information, and talking points administrators can use with staff and the community.
 - Establish and clearly communicate the principals' role in communicating both to staff and community and hold them accountable for such communication.
- B. Establish clear lines of communication from the central office to schools.
 - Assure that each central office staff member understands his/her role in communication with staff across the district and hold them accountable for such communication.
 - Publish for staff a guide on "where to get information" from the central office.
 - Establish a schedule for central office administrators' visits to schools.
 - Prioritize central office information to staff and distribute it directly to staff via e-mail.
- C. Develop methods for listening to staff's ideas and concerns.
 - Establish some face-to-face listening methods: visits to schools (chronicling what is heard), focus groups on specific topics, problem-solving task forces, superintendent's advisory committees.

- Regularly use methods to widely listen to staff: online surveys on specific topics, periodic climate surveys.

4. Equip staff to be ambassadors for the district

- A. Hold principals/supervisors accountable for communicating and provide the tools and resources they need to share accurate and timely information with staff, parents and the community.
 - Provide principals and supervisors fact sheets and talking points about major district initiatives.
 - Consider a series of communication training sessions for principals.

- B. Equip schools to better communicate district information with their communities.
 - Review schools' current communications methods and tools; share strategies for success.
 - Conduct a communications and marketing workshop for school staff.
 - Develop an e-mail Key Communicators program for individual schools.
 - Provide district information focused on priority messages that is timely, newsworthy, brief and relevant for school newsletters and Web sites.

5. Develop methods for listening to the community

- A. Re-establish the district's Key Communicators program with a focus on making the effort two-way (using the network to ask questions of members as well as provide them information.) This effort can be managed by the community relations manager but should be "chaired" by the superintendent.
- B. Continue the superintendent's coffees, making them topic-specific in the future.
- C. The district has numerous committees and task forces in place. Track issues and questions that arise in these committees and use them to help determine where the community at-large needs more information.
- D. Once the board establishes a productive governance relationship, it should engage in regular discussions with other local leaders or governance entities on issues of importance to the community at large.
- E. Consider establishing a study circles program to engage the community in addressing community-wide challenges that affect the school district such as growth, diversity and student achievement. Multiple low-cost and free resources are available from the Study Circles Resource Center, www.studycircles.org.

6. Establish a proactive media relations program

As part of the district's overall communications plan, develop a proactive strategic media plan that advances the district's key messages. The community relations manager should direct this effort.

- A. Establish appropriate spokesperson roles for the media. In general, the board should speak for board and policy matters; the superintendent or his designee should speak on district matters; principals should speak on school matters. (See Recommendation #1.)
- B. Educate district-level administrators and principals about the critical role they play in deepening reporters' understanding of K-12 education and the important issues facing the school district.
 - Provide consultation, training and support to ensure administrators are skilled in and comfortable with working with the media.
- C. Pitch an op-ed to the *Colorado Springs Gazette* at least 1-2 times a year that reinforces the district's strategic vision and key messages. Authored by the superintendent or board president, the op-ed would take advantage of timely news hooks to promote the district's best practices (and lessons learned) that would be of value to a regional audience. Op-eds offer an unfiltered way of conveying accurate information about your initiatives and core messages to the community. This helps cement the district's role as an authoritative, go-to source on K-12 education and deepens readers' understanding of the issues confronting public schools.
- D. Conduct editorial board meetings at least 1-2 times a year with the *Gazette* and the *Tribune* to promote core messages and understanding of major initiatives, and to further enhance the district's relationship with influential leaders at the newspapers. The superintendent, board president and community relations manager should attend.
- E. On a regular basis, pitch stories about compelling or unique district initiatives that reinforce core messages to the *Gazette*, the *Tribune* and other major news outlets read by or listened to by the community.
- F. Assure that interactions with media reinforce transparency.
 - Make every effort to make information readily available to reporters, minimizing the need for formal requests for public information. The more open the district is, the more open it will be portrayed in the media.
 - When responding to media questions, district officials should present the full picture of challenges and avoid creating the impression of "spin."

7. Develop strategies for communicating school district information to parents

- A. Create fact sheets and talking points on key initiatives and issues for principals and other school staff to use in communicating with parents. (see Recommendation #4A.)
- B. Develop brief articles that communicate key district initiatives and core messages for regular inclusion in school newsletters and on school Web sites.
- C. Obtain schools' e-mail lists to use in distributing district publications directly to parents.
- D. Develop written pieces on district standards, curriculum benchmarks and "what to expect" to be distributed to parents as students transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school.
- E. Board members, the superintendent and top administrators develop a schedule for attendance at significant parent meetings, such as accountability committees. Information presented and learned in these meetings should be communicated back to the leadership team as a whole.

8. Develop strategies for communicating with residents who do not have children in District 38

District leaders must leverage opportunities to communicate with taxpayers who do not have children in the district. In this community there appears to be a high level of interest and ownership in the school district as compared to other districts in which CASB works. This presents an opportunity for the district to capitalize on this feeling of ownership to build support for the district. The challenge is reaching non-parent residents with a limited school district budget.

- A. Assure that a significant number of non-parent residents are included in the district's Key Communicators Network. (See Recommendation #5.)
- B. Develop a plan for board members, the superintendent and central office administrators to actively engage in community organizations such as:
 - Sertoma or other community service organizations
 - Neighborhood associations
 - Local chambers of commerce
 - Churches
 - Community centers
 - Senior citizen organizations
 - Realtor associations

In addition to being ongoing participants in community groups, district officials should consider making presentations as appropriate. These presentations should promote the district's strategic vision and key messages.

- C. Print a limited number of hard copies of *The Update*, the district's quarterly newsletter, for distribution at various locations such as libraries, doctors'/dentists' offices, senior citizens centers, etc.
- D. Work with principals to develop a "See For Yourself" program to invite non-parents into the schools to "experience school" and to see what and how students are learning. The new high school provides an excellent opportunity for a "See For Yourself" event.
- E. Establish a school district volunteer program or some mechanism to allow non-parent taxpayers to assist or provide their expertise to the schools. This would serve the dual purpose of providing outside help to resource-strapped schools as well as to build relationships with taxpayers who may become school district champions as a result.
- F. Explore ways for non-parent residents to use school buildings or to take lifelong learning classes in the schools.
- G. Invite senior citizens to attend school events such as plays or sporting events for free or at a discount.
- H. Distribute packets of promotional information about the school district to area realtors.

The Results Are In – Now What?

Lewis-Palmer District #38 Communications Audit

Digesting the results of a comprehensive, district-wide communications audit can be equally enlightening and daunting. The information is dense, the recommendations expansive and the next steps not always immediately clear.

CASB has sketched out some early ideas for how district administrators, the community relations manager and the school board might move forward. You may choose to adopt these next steps as your blueprint or tweak them further before implementation.

We are hopeful that the key phases suggested next will help the district leverage the findings in the communications audit for more effective communications with staff, parents and the public.

Phase One: May-June 2007

Review and Disseminate Findings

- District administrators, the community relations manager and the school board members review findings and recommendations.
- District leadership discusses in a work session major “takeaways” from the audit report, such as: what findings and recommendations resonate with the group; what additional questions do the findings raise; what additional research must be done, if needed; and, is there any disagreement about next steps and why and how will those issues be resolved? The community relations manager takes the lead in moving the project forward.
- Community relations manager develops steps for disseminating the audit findings to all staff, focus group participants, key communicators and other major constituencies. The plan should identify what, how, when and to whom information will be delivered. This should also include communication tools that will be used to disseminate the information and an explanation to target audiences about how the audit findings will inform next steps. (For example, the district should send a follow-up note to all focus group participants with a copy of the audit report’s executive summary and a Web link to the full report online.)

Phase Two: July-August 2007

Update and Refine District Communications Plan

- Community relations manager identifies the key findings and recommendations that will be used to inform the district’s strategic communications plan, including: 1) goals and desired outcomes; 2) core messages and talking points; 3) major categories of the plan (e.g., strategic internal and external communications, media plan and listening programs); 4) high priority vs. low priority strategies for

each category; 5) evaluation of success; 6) who is responsible for executing the plan; 7) timelines; and 8) budget.

- Draft plan is presented to district leaders and board for feedback and further refinement. Additional testing of potential strategies is conducted with targeted audiences and the results are incorporated into the plan.
- Explore the development of a signature communications initiative or campaign that works in tandem with the district's new communications plan and serves three major purposes: 1) sends a message that the district takes communication seriously and is working hard to improve internal and external communication based on the audit findings; 2) educates staff and key communicators about the district's key messages; and, 3) leverages interest among staff leaders, parent leaders, business leaders, senior citizens, and other community leaders who agree to serve as ambassadors on behalf of the district. To work successfully, the initiative must be a genuine effort on behalf of the district that acknowledges both the positive and negative issues raised in the audit and how the district is using the audit findings as appropriate to improve district-wide communications. The initiative would also serve to signal a new chapter in how the district will communicate with internal and external audiences.

Phase Three: September-November 2007

Rollout of the Communications Plan and Communications Initiative

- Execute the communications plan, note progress toward goals, adjust or modify as needed, report to key internal and external communicators about notable progress and challenges that arise; etc.
- Meet with key leaders to discuss the communications initiative and make further refinements as needed. Prepare all materials needed in advance of the initiative's rollout. Consider full roll out of the communications initiative in January 2008 or preview in the fall with a more in-depth presentation in the spring.

Conclusion

Lewis-Palmer District #38 is to be commended for taking a hard look at improving its communication program. The recommendations contained in this report should provide a healthy start for improved communication in the district. CASB stands ready to further assist the district in these efforts.

What Does/Can a School Public Relations Professional Do For a District?

A school public relations person handles these major functions:

1. *Public relations counsel* - Provides public relations counsel, taking a proactive stance. Anticipates problems and provides solutions.
2. *Communication with internal and external publics* - Handles all aspects of the school district's communications tools such as its newsletters and Web site, among others.
3. *Media relations* - Writes news releases for all local newspapers/TV/radio; works to get media coverage of school district news. Serves as the media's liaison with the school district.
4. *Budget/bond issue campaigns* - Stays closely attuned to the entire budget-making process and promotes community input. Develops budget/bond issue communications in accordance with Colorado campaign law.
5. *Communications planning/crisis communications planning* - Writes/develops a communications plan for the district, detailing how to reach its internal and external publics; writes/develops a crisis communications plan of reaching publics, gathering the facts and dealing with media in a crisis.
6. *Public relations research, surveys, polls, informal research* - Conducts formal and informal research to determine public opinion and attitude as a basis for planning and action.
7. *School district branding and marketing* - Promotes the district's strengths/achievements, and its solutions to problems.
8. *Student/staff recognition* - Vigorously publicizes student and staff achievement; develops staff and retirement recognition programs.
9. *Information station for the district* - Answers public and new resident requests for information; maintains extensive background files; keeps district's historical and budget passage records; and plans for school district anniversary celebrations.
10. *Public relations trainer* - Provides public relations training to staff in areas such as talking to the media, communicating in a crisis and recognizing that non-teaching staff are part of the school PR team.
11. *Community relation's liaison* - Serves as the district's liaison with community groups such as civic associations and service clubs; helps plan/publicize district's parent, senior citizen and community service programs. Develops ways to bring the community into the schools.
12. *The "I's" are crucial* - True communication, we know, is a two-way process of both inflow and outflow of information. A school PR person, in essence, helps keep both "I's" of the district open, and works to keep the public, in turn, both "I"nformed and "I"nvolved in the schools.

Adapted from the National School Public Relations Association Web site, www.nspr.org