Hickman Mills C-1 School District
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Introduction

The Hickman Mills C-1 School District (HMC-1) serves 5,610 students in the South Kansas City, Missouri area. The district has an early childhood center, an alternative education center, six elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. It enjoys the distinction of becoming the first consolidated school district in Missouri in 1902. It is also the only urban district in the state to have received accreditation from the nonprofit AdvancED, which recognizes and validates school quality efforts.

HMC-1 students are diverse, with an enrollment that is 69% African American, 13% Hispanic, 9% white, 6% multi-racial and 3% other. Among them, 7% are English language learners. Due to high poverty levels across the district, HMC-1 participates in the Missouri Department of Education’s community eligibility provision, which provides free meals for all students.

The district is provisionally accredited by the state and making strides toward full accreditation, but it continues to be challenged by a steady decline in enrollment—with a 15.5% loss during the last five years. It also has an eroded tax base, and the Kansas City poverty rate is 16.5%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. At the end of the 2018 school year, the district closed two elementary schools in response to these challenges and distributed its STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) and project-based learning programs to all schools.

In recognition of the improvement needs of its remaining, aging school buildings, the HMC-1 Board of Education has voted to place a bond issue on the August 2020 ballot.

That election will test the degree to which HMC-1’s patrons feel connected to and are willing to invest in the future of the district. The district’s diversity and relatively small size are strengths, but they also present natural obstacles to ensuring that thousands of stakeholders—students, parents, instructional and support staff, volunteers, taxpayers, community and business leaders, legislators, etc.—feel engaged in their schools, valued by the district and represented in the important decisions that affect them.

The HMC-1 Board of Education and Superintendent Yolanda Cargile, Ed.D., are committed to effective communication throughout the school system and with the community. By contracting for and approving this communication audit by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), they have demonstrated their willingness to reflect on the district’s communication strengths and challenges. They have also shown their ongoing commitment to strengthening the relationship between the district and its key stakeholders.

Since 1935, NSPRA has been providing school communication training and services to school districts, departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations throughout the United States and Canada. Among those services is the NSPRA Communication Audit, which provides:

- An important foundation for developing and implementing a strategic communication plan.
- A benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future.

In serving HMC-1, the goals of the NSPRA Communication Audit process were to:

- Seek data, opinion and perceptions, and from these to assess the effectiveness and management of public relations, marketing and engagement efforts in the district.
- Provide customized recommendations on strategies and best practices to enhance the overall communication program.
In opting to conduct a communication audit, HMC-1’s leaders have clearly indicated their desire to analyze communication practices across the district as well as within the existing offices that perform communication functions.

The key findings, observations and recommendations in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP), any other department or HMC-1 as a whole, they are intended to help the district improve the effectiveness of current communication, engagement and marketing efforts and to support its commitment to "providing a foundation for a proudly diverse and historic community."

It is difficult to measure public relations overall. However, individual elements can be assessed. It can be determined whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program, however—including a communication program—is to determine whether it is helping the district move forward on its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing recommendations, the auditor reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and the resource materials in light of the district’s mission, five-year strategic plan and education pledge to its stakeholders.

**Guiding Definition**

NSPRA works to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication engagement and marketing practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

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

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

**Opinion Research as a Foundation**

An NSPRA Communication Audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions and the effectiveness of current public relations, engagement and marketing efforts, and offers recommendations to enhance or expand the overall program. The audit also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication program begins with opinion research.

**Scope and Nature of the Audit**

A communication audit of HMC-1 enables the district to view its communication from an outside, independent perspective. The NSPRA consultant for this communication audit was Steve Mulvenon, Ph.D. His vita is included in the appendix of this report.

The first step in the communication audit involved PIOP submitting samples of materials developed to communicate with various district stakeholders. All forms of communication were examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal and ease of use. The auditor also reviewed the district’s website, video and social media platforms, with an additional focus on stakeholders’ use of and engagement with the online content.
In addition, the auditor reviewed other relevant information such as community and staff surveys, demographic data, strategic plans, district policies, communications staffing, news items, etc.

However, the core of the communication audit process was the onsite focus group component. The auditor met with 10 focus groups and conducted interviews with district leaders and communications staff in person on Oct. 28-29, 2019. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions, and each session was approximately one hour in length.

HMC-1 officials identified and invited as participants those who could represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The stakeholder groups represented in the focus group sessions and interview sessions included the following:

- Elementary parents
- Secondary parents
- Principals and assistant principals
- Executive leadership team
- Elementary/pre-K teachers
- Secondary teachers
- Support staff
- Community and business leaders
- Volunteers and partners
- Board of Education members

Following the review of materials, focus group discussion comments and interview feedback, the auditor identified key findings and prepared recommendations for improving two-way communication and engagement with the district’s internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by school systems around North America and are reflected within NSPRA’s Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures.

The final report was carefully reviewed and edited by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, and Associate Director Mellissa Braham.

Assumptions

It is assumed that school systems undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations and communication programs. It is also assumed that they wish to view the school district and its work through the perceptions of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable doing so.

However, some caution should be observed regarding the nature of such a review. Whenever opinions are solicited about an institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless there is information on what may need to be changed.

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs held by focus group participants and provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist. The recommendations in this report are designed to address these gaps and to assist district leaders and communications staff in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

This report is intended to build on the many positive activities and accomplishments of the district and communications staff as well as to suggest options and considerations for enhancing and expanding the district’s overall communication program.
### Recommendations

The recommendations in this report have districtwide implications, and a number of them apply to other staff and departments beyond those with formal communication functions. Implementing all of these recommendations is a long-term effort, one that might span several years. Doing so while maintaining existing programs may entail an investment in additional staff capacity. For those reasons, any new communication components should be introduced as budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

### Considerations for implementing recommendations

The recommendations in this report address immediate communication needs as well as those that are ongoing or that should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. Some recommendations may apply only to those with formal communication tasks, and others may apply to all departments and schools. Some recommendations may be implemented right away, and others may require additional staff capacity or financial resources to undertake while maintaining existing programs. This is a long-term effort in which the report should serve as a road map for the future.

Recommendations are presented with the intention of helping HMC-1 take its communication program to an exemplary level that serves as a model for other school districts. Communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, evaluated and regularly updated. With its capable staff in the Public Information and Partnerships Office and the recommendations in this report, HMC-1 is well equipped to meet the evolving communication needs of its families, staff and community.

### Copies to participants

Focus group participants were generous in sharing their thoughts and ideas during the focus group sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit. Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, we recommend that this report be shared with focus group participants and made available on the district website.
Key Findings

The following key findings reflect common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and the review of district materials.

General Perceptions of External and Internal Focus Groups

District Image Strengths

• Focus group participants generally described the district’s atmosphere as warm, student-centered and caring. They noted an overarching commitment to supporting families with a comprehensive set of wraparound services. Family school liaisons were mentioned as an asset and an example of the district’s commitment.

• In nearly every group, internal and external, HMC-1’s work to promote racial equity was identified as a clear and visible strength.

• In internal focus groups, participants referred to the district as innovative, progressive and advanced. Regarding technology, they pointed to the recent roll out of 1:1 computers and tablets for students.

• In several groups, participants lauded the district’s free, full-day pre-K program as evidence of a commitment to improving school readiness.

• Among the teacher focus groups, there was an appreciation of a strong professional development program.

• District administrators, particularly the superintendent, were generally seen as accessible, visible and active in the community by both external and internal focus group participants. They are perceived as constantly seeking to implement best practices across the district.

• The district benefits from a strong base of support from a varied list of community partners and non-profit organizations. Among those participants representing the wider community, several felt that the district’s community partnerships appear to be robust and growing. They pointed to the recent and very successful Family Summit as evidence.

District Image Challenges

• When asked how the district was described in the community, focus group participants used terms such as rough, declining, substandard, poor academics, dangerous and “the hood.”

  ▪ Based on comments in the focus groups and interviews with key staff, much of the negativity stems from a perception that schools are unsafe and that student discipline is not being sufficiently addressed. Stories (and video) of specific incidents have circulated widely on social media.

• In several internal and external focus groups, multiple participants felt that the district is not currently providing adequate student support in the areas of mental health and discipline. Many attributed this to a lack of necessary finances and/or inadequate staffing levels, particularly at athletic events.

• Based on media coverage and on focus group comments, part of the image challenge stems from an enrollment decline, an eroding tax base and a decision last school year to close two elementary schools. Local media described the district as “troubled” and “cash-strapped.”

• Comments from community members and employees noted a troubling rift between individual school board members, whose comments they felt portrayed the district in less than a favorable light.
Communication Strengths

• The superintendent is widely seen as an active and good communicator, someone who is accessible, transparent and invested in the community.

• The Public Information and Partnerships Office is seen as a valued and valuable resource among district and school administrators. They particularly appreciate the department’s event management skills and support with messaging during crisis situations.

• School board participants noted strong internal communications. They appreciated the effort by the superintendent to keep them “in the loop” with frequent messages.

• There is a strong, positive working relationship between the superintendent and the director of Public Information and Partnerships. Marissa Wamble is viewed as a “communications expert” by her colleagues and is a valued member of the executive leadership team.

• Within the Public Information and Partnerships Office:
  > There is a clear collegial and professional relationship.
  > There is a general recognition and agreement of their strengths and areas of need. They are “on the same page.”
  > Their efforts with social media, especially Twitter, were frequently mentioned in several groups as a strength.

• HMC-1’s social media efforts are well established, especially with Twitter and Facebook. At the time of the auditor’s review, the district Twitter account (https://twitter.com/HMC1proud) had 547 followers and was frequently updated. The superintendent’s Twitter account had 1,465 followers. Several principals, schools and sports programs also had active accounts. The district Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/HMC1Proud/) is active, up-to-date and enjoys 3,634 followers.

Communication Challenges

• When asked for the greatest communications challenge facing the district, every focus group mentioned overcoming the negative image and perception of the district, and developing clear and consistent messaging about where improvement is needed and what is being done to get there.

• Nearly all of the focus groups mentioned the difficulty of communicating with parents. From faulty email addresses to changing cell phone numbers to parents’ failure to read printed materials, the need to improve parent communications is a top-of-mind issue across the district.

• Participants in a majority of the focus groups cited changing demographics within the district—growing levels of poverty, an aging population, greater racial and ethnic diversity—as another challenge to effectively communicating with all stakeholders.

• There is a general lack of awareness both in the community and among staff about the August 2020 bond election. Several participants said this was symptomatic of the district’s need to be more proactive in communicating about major, important issues. (At the time of the auditor’s visit in October 2019, the district had not yet begun any formal communications rollout regarding the bond election.) Additionally, in both internal and external focus groups, concern was expressed about the general economic health of the community. Those perceptions will certainly impact the
level of voter support for the bond issue, and leaders will have to take them into consideration when planning the upcoming bond campaign.

• The district’s reliance on digital communication methods is seen as a benefit by some stakeholders and as a challenge by others. Those who like it appreciate that they can get the information in the manner they prefer, but those who have concerns worry about:
  > Families with limited or no Internet access missing out on communications, resources or opportunities.
  > Teachers and support staff being out of the communication loop during the work day when information is released via social media.
  > Senior citizens and empty nesters with no direct connection to the district being left out.

• In many of the focus groups, one or more participants commented on difficulties with navigating the district website. Generally, they described it as useful but not as a go-to source of news and information. Following are some of the most commonly expressed concerns among participants:
  > Several felt that there are too many clicks required to get to desired information. The section on enrollment was cited by several as an example.
  > Some internal stakeholders, many of whom have regular computer access, were concerned about the amount of scrolling required to see a page.
  > While some appreciated the standardization of the school websites template, many more felt that the school websites are not providing enough timely and unique content for their buildings. That was especially true for several elementary schools.

• There do not seem to be clear protocols or expectations for who is responsible for communicating important information or key messages following Executive Leadership Team (ELT) meetings. District leaders indicated that while there is not a set standard for what communications must happen after every meeting, ELT information is often embedded throughout the Leadership Link, though it is not labeled as coming from ELT. Getting such information to filter down throughout the entire organization is critical to helping employees serve as trusted messengers and ensuring that they are “in the loop.” Focus group participants said that was not always the case.

Sources for News and Information

• Both internal and external groups appreciated the district’s efforts to communicate on a wide variety of platforms including email, text messages, social media and phone blasts.

• There was not a wide awareness of the C-1 School Messenger in any group. After being reminded of what it is, a number of participants said they just skim it. While some said it was attractive and well-designed, others said it had too much “fluff” and not enough hard news.

• Employees appreciate receiving Board Briefs and look forward to it, although they noted that the links do not always work.

• Internal groups were appreciative of emails from the Public Information and Partnerships Office, especially surrounding potential or current crisis events.

• Although not mentioned in any focus group, usage statistics provided by the district show a solid level of awareness of the district’s mobile app.
Observations and Comments

The auditor offers these general observations and comments following the conclusion of the comprehensive communication audit process:

• **It is time for the Hickman Mills C-1 School District to take its communications program to the next level.** As noted in the key findings, HMC-1’s stakeholders acknowledge that the district’s image has suffered for the last several decades. Whether real or perceived, it is viewed in a negative light. That said, there is a wellspring of support from staff and community groups waiting to be tapped into. At present, the biggest hole in HMC-1’s overall communication program is the lack of well-defined strategic communication plan and a marketing plan to accomplish this shift in recognition status.

• **Superintendent Dr. Yolanda Cargile is a popular and respected leader, who is known as a “homegrown” educator with her roots in Hickman Mills.** The district is fortunate to have a visionary superintendent, who is seen as a highly credible education leader in the community. She is well respected for her commitment to racial equity and her community involvement. Many teachers applauded her frequent classroom visits, where she is welcomed as a colleague.

• **As noted above, a written, formal strategic communication plan is needed to support HMC-1’s goals.** A more strategic and proactive approach to communication, beginning with a comprehensive communication plan, is needed to focus the overall communication program and support a renewed emphasis on branding and marketing efforts. Some keys to success that are included in this report are creating a plan that is research-based and aligning surveys and other evaluation tools to provide actionable feedback on the communication plan and marketing efforts.

• **An increased focus on internal communication is needed to create staff ambassadors, improve key messaging about district initiatives and reinforce the HMC-1 brand.** Internal focus groups noted a pattern of inconsistency in both the dissemination of information and the messages shared, which directly contributes to a lack of awareness and understanding of school district initiatives that was apparent among staff participants. Communication protocols are needed at all levels to ensure key messages and critical information cascade effectively and efficiently throughout the district so that all employees are able to communicate in “one clear voice.”

• **Hickman Mills C-1 School District could benefit from defining its identity and value proposition with a coordinated marketing and branding campaign.** As a part of that effort, HMC-1 has an opportunity in its rebranding efforts to move away from its current logo that connotes geometric movement to one that communicates student success and diversity. A rebranding campaign can engage both internal and external stakeholders in identifying positive attributes of the district.

• **Communication vehicles need to be continually assessed and evaluated.** HMC-1 has a variety of tools available to communicate district messages, including print materials, e-newsletters, websites, a mobile app, social media and engagement activities. Based on focus group feedback and auditor evaluation, there needs to be continual improvement of the district’s various communication channels to ensure they are connecting with target audiences, delivering the information audiences want in the formats they prefer, and are resulting in outcomes and actions that benefit the district.
• **The HMC-1 Board of Education is widely perceived as being divided, and in some cases, that perceived division is seen as negatively affecting the school system.** This perception makes it more challenging for district leaders to communicate a unified vision for the district and to build stakeholders’ faith in their commitment to that vision. District leaders, including the school board, should seek every opportunity to communicate with one voice, authentically, on issues where they are unified to build greater confidence among stakeholders in their school system governance.

• **A major theme in almost all focus groups concerned challenges posed from an eroding tax base, a loss of retail businesses and the budgetary impact of the tax abatement given to the Cerner Corporation.** As HMC-1 works to enhance its communication program, it should make outreach to the business community a high priority and incorporate those efforts into the recommended strategic communication plan.

• **Hickman Mills C-1 School District is poised to raise its profile as a leading school system in the metropolitan Kansas City area.** The district has the leadership and communication team in place to effectively meet its communication and marketing goals and build strong support for the schools. The district has quality teachers, experienced administrators and innovative programs. The challenge is to effectively communicate that to the broader community. Doing so will provide the foundation for success as HMC-1 continues to grow and move forward.
Recommendations

In the Hickman Mills C-1 school district, communication efforts are guided by the district strategic plan and the Public Information and Partnerships Office’s (PIOP) goal of “informing the public and district community about HMC-1’s quality and diverse learning environment, as well as the district’s dedication to finding strategic and researched-based solutions to the great global challenges in education we face today.”

In the PIOP office, the director splits her time between her communication duties and overseeing the All-In Mentors Program. A full-time public information specialist manages a wide range of duties, including event coordination, social media, video district and school websites, marketing campaigns and photography. Supporting their communication efforts is an administrative assistant, who also serves as the district receptionist. The district also contracts for creative services and event planning. Finally, PIOP manages the district printing operations. Together, the team is tasked with providing communication strategy, guidance and support in a variety of areas for the district and its schools.

Communications staff have accomplished a great deal in HMC-1. The following recommendations focus on areas for improvement or growth in the district’s communication program, but that should not detract from the many positives coming out of the communications office. In fact, many of the recommendations will require commitment and participation from the entire administrative team if the district is going to realize meaningful improvements in its communication program.

The recommendations are listed in a suggested order of priority, but the district may choose to implement different recommendations and action steps at different times. Some can be implemented immediately, and others may take several years. This is a long-term effort, and new communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Strategically align the overarching goals of the district’s communication program and the daily efforts of communications staff with HMC-1’s mission and strategic plan.
2. Work to build a culture of communication throughout the district.
3. Strengthen communication between the district, schools and parents.
4. Develop a comprehensive marketing plan to raise HMC-1’s profile and solidify its brand.
5. Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district’s decision-making process.
6. Develop a key communicator network that emphasizes and strengthens relationships.
7. Continue efforts to make the HMC-1 website the go-to source of district information.
8. Enhance communication with residents without children enrolled in HMC-1.
9. Review and expand the crisis communication plan.
10. Consider the staffing and resource implications of the recommendations in this report.
Recommendation 1:
Strategically align the overarching goals of the district’s communication program and the daily efforts of communications staff with HMC-1’s mission and strategic plan.

The day-to-day communication demands of any public school system can easily consume a majority of staff members’ time, leaving little time for strategic planning and evaluation of communication efforts. This can result in a communications department spending the majority of its time and resources on general, habitual and reactive communications rather than on delivering the district’s key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships. Communication programs, when not guided by a clear vision and measurable objectives, easily fall victim to the latest communications request or crisis of the day while missing strategic opportunities to expand a district’s outreach and brand.

A strategic communication plan with clear goals and measurable objectives created specifically for the work of the Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP) will help keep the department’s communication efforts on track and maximize the value of HMC-1’s communication dollar. It will also increase the effectiveness of the district’s overall communication program by providing PIOP staff with:

- A gauge by which to judge whether their tasks are mission critical, nice but low priority, or an unnecessary and inefficient use of staff time. This helps ensure key messages are not lost in the day-to-day communication tasks that can overwhelm school districts.

- A means for reporting on their progress and demonstrating accountability to district leadership and other stakeholders.

The strategic communication plan should be developed by communications staff (see Action Step 1.1) to align with the district’s five-year strategic plan, which serves as the guiding philosophy for all departments throughout the district. Goals in the strategic communication plan should be for and about the work of PIOP, but their achievement should contribute to the achievement of the district’s strategic plan goal. The department’s current goal of “informing the public and district community about HMC-1’s quality and diverse learning environment, as well as the district’s dedication to finding strategic and researched-based solutions to the great global challenges in education we face today” aligns with the district’s strategic plan goal, but consideration should be given to shifting its focus from the department’s output—“informing” efforts—to its desired outcome (e.g., All district stakeholders will be aware of “HMC-1’s quality and diverse learning environment...”).

As part of clarifying the vision for the communications function, HMC-1 school leaders can use this communication audit report, in conjunction with the district’s five-year strategic plan, to determine critical communication and engagement priorities. The recommendations in this report offer some proven strategies that can help to focus communication efforts and may also indicate functions that can be decreased in emphasis or that need more support. Without a plan, it is difficult to effectively create an open dialogue with stakeholders, to deliver the messages that are important to both the district and its stakeholders, and to build support for the schools.
**Action Step 1.1**

Develop a strategic, district-level communication plan that outlines measurable objectives intended to move the communication program toward achieving its goals.

A comprehensive, strategic communication plan provides transparency and accountability for the implementation of all district communication goals, including those outlined in HMC-1’s 2019-2024 Strategic Plan. It is a vehicle for moving a school district from a reactive stance to a proactive position in communications. This plan should guide communication activities; however, it is important to remember that school districts exist in an ever-changing environment, impacted by community, state and federal factors. Creating a flexible and dynamic plan that allows for the impact of these factors and mandates will ensure that it remains a relevant and useful tool for keeping communication efforts on track.

PIOP should develop a strategic communication plan that clearly demonstrates how its work relates to achievement of the district’s mission and that outlines communication program components, objectives and activities that directly support HMC-1’s strategic plan. Each of the three pillars in the district’s strategic plan (i.e., district, schools, community) have roles and responsibilities for PIOP, but what is missing are department-specific details on the necessary research, planning, implementation and evaluation measures used by exemplary communication programs.

A comprehensive, strategic communication plan will provide a clear road map to drive communication efforts in both the short and long term. The communication plan should be based on research that is regularly conducted to determine constituent needs and expectations about communications as well as opinions and attitudes about HMC-1 and its programs. This communication audit report is an excellent starting point on that research. So are the community and staff surveys conducted as part of the district’s strategic plan development.

NSPRA advises the use of a plan that adheres to the four-step strategic communication planning model, often referred to by the acronyms RPIE or RACE:

- **Research** and analyze the situation, including stakeholders’ needs and wants.
- **Plan** for how to address the situation by setting longer-term communication goals and shorter-term, measurable objectives. Articulate clear goals and measurable objectives for communication based on desired changes in awareness levels, knowledge levels, perceptions and behaviors of key audiences. Identify the strategies you plan to use to achieve your objectives and the tactics/tools for accomplishing each strategy. Focus around...
key messages. Identify your affected stakeholder groups and the best ways to reach and build relationships with them. Delineate specific tools and tactics for each audience. Identify needed resources to deploy tools/tactics and how they will be acquired.

- **Implement** your plan and begin communicating with specific tools on an established schedule. Articulate who is responsible for deployment of each tool/tactic and the timeline for deployment.

- **Evaluate** the outcomes, whether you achieved your measurable objectives and the success of the strategies and tactics used. Include evaluative measures based on the articulated goals and measurable objectives.

The planning process will demonstrate how communication projects, tasks and responsibilities support specific HMC-1 goals, provide clear direction for staff, prioritize the work and increase effectiveness.

It also will help staff identify higher priority areas that may need more support and lower-priority projects/activities they may need to abandon. It can be difficult to release work that is familiar and for which we feel ownership, but part of effective communication planning is identifying practices that are no longer effective. A well-written and thoughtfully crafted strategic communication plan can provide a measure of the value of projects, programs and activities in which the communications staff is engaged. With a small communications office of only two full-time professionals in HMC-1, it is essential that their time is spent on matters of importance.

Following are some examples of strategic communication plans created by school districts based on the recommendations from an NSPRA Communication Audit Report (available to NSPRA members at [www.nspra.org/gold-mine](http://www.nspra.org/gold-mine)):  


**Action Step 1.2**

Communicate with objectives in mind, and avoid jumping to preferred tactics.

Once a comprehensive, strategic communication plan has been developed, the PIOP office can organize part of its regular staff meetings to review their progress toward meeting the measurable objectives of the plan. This will keep staff focused and energized on impactful communications work and reduce the distraction of less impactful tasks.

These discussions also offer the opportunity to reflect on how to communicate with objectives in mind rather than jumping first to familiar, preferred tactics. This helps avoid the selection of tactics based on misperceptions about widespread community use, which can happen when there is a highly vocal but not widely representative cheerleader for a particular tool or platform. For example, while social media capabilities are abundant within PIOP thanks to a talented team and growing in popularity among school leaders across the country, local research may show that the most effective way to achieve an objective among a particular stakeholder group is through a campaign that involves face-to-face time.

Both creativity and the use of research should be encouraged in exploring new strategies and tactics to keep the communications efforts relevant and highly effective.
**Action Step 1.3**  
**Continue to create mini-communication plans for key initiatives and specific programs, and show administrators how their initiatives might benefit from a similar planning process.**

PIOP has developed a number of seasonal and event-specific mini-communication plans (such as for the Family Summit) to organize its work in support of HMC-1 initiatives. This practice should continue, but each mini-communication plan should be guided by the overarching communication goals and measurable objectives established in PIOP’s new district-level strategic communication plan. As the need to communicate about new initiatives and programs unfolds during the year, continue to prepare individual, mini-communication plans targeted to the desired outcomes.

In the internal focus groups with principals and directors, they said their communications responsibilities were unclear and could benefit from some training. Providing basic communication training, as well as mini-communication plan templates, can help and encourage department heads and principals to develop their own plans for communicating about their special projects, events or issues. The communications team can support their efforts and use of best practices with training, resources and advice (see **Action Step 2.1**).

The training process can begin simply by modeling the desired behavior. If an administrator is responsible for launching a new initiative, a communications staff member might offer to assist with planning communications about the initiative. Schedule a meeting, and bring a blank mini-communication plan template. Work side-by-side together to fill out the template with a goal, measurable objective(s), key messages, target audiences, strategies, tactics/communication tools to be used, a timeline of tasks and who will be responsible for each task. Once administrators have gone through this exercise a few times with communications staff, they will feel more comfortable following the template to engage in their own communication planning when necessary.

Developing the communication skills of the entire administrative team can help lay the groundwork for HMC-1 to become more proactive in telling its story and build strong support both internally and externally.

**Action Step 1.4**  
**Continue to evaluate all communication strategies, tactics and activities.**

Especially important to an effective communication plan is the evaluation component. Being able to measure outcomes (e.g., change in behavior or attitude) and not just outputs (e.g., number of posts or news releases issued) is a critical component when decisions must be made about continuing specific communication activities given limited resources and staff capacity. The focus group feedback for this audit, as well as the results of the surveys conducted as part of the strategic plan development, offers a fresh perspective and a baseline of where the communication effort now stands.

Following are some additional suggestions for future evaluation methods to include in a strategic communication plan:

- **Follow-up communication surveys.** On key areas of concern within this review, HMC-1 can and should conduct follow-up surveys to determine if any progress has been made and to inform next steps. These can be coordinated internally or through an outside vendor and can occur as stand-alone
surveys or a series of questions on another, larger district survey.

- **Soft soundings.** Ask staff and parents for their opinions in informal conversations at meetings and social events, as a “by the way” at the end of phone call or even in line at the store. Recruit other administrators and school board members to do the same, and provide them with a “question of the month.” Focus on a single topic or publication, and keep a running list of responses. For example, ask whether they saw the recent issue of C-1 School Messenger and what they liked about it. This type of casual outreach can also increase engagement and goodwill while demonstrating that district leaders are approachable and willing to listen to input.

- **Brief focus groups.** Gather parents’ opinions during brief focus group sessions offered as part of school open house programs or PTA/PTO meetings. Focus questions on just one or two specific district/school communication vehicles and activities.

- **Digital analytics.** Regularly review website, social media and mobile app analytics, and track changes over time as content is updated, changed or added to determine what is currently resonating with users.

- **Reader surveys.** There is value in conducting specific reader surveys annually or biennially to determine reader expectations and desires and how well they are being met by district publications. Surveys can be conducted districtwide and also at the local school level. This will help HMC-1 assess whether publications are connecting with audiences and whether some should be revised, combined with others or discontinued. For example, feedback from some focus groups suggest the district’s e-newsletter, C-1 School Messenger, may not be resonating with readers. (Some felt it was too “soft” and needed to contain hard news. Others said they only skim it.) Planning for a reader survey a few months or even the year after any adjustments are made would help the district determine whether those adjustments were effective.

### Action Step 1.5

| Develop a specific communication plan for the upcoming bond election. |

The Board of Education has approved a bond election for August 2020, and at the time of the auditor’s review, details of the bond issue and ballot language were in development. As noted elsewhere in this report, there was a very low level of awareness on this matter among the focus groups. It is urgent that the district develop a plan for communications regarding its upcoming election campaign.

The most effective communication programs are guided by an overall strategic communication plan (Action Step 1.1) that is supplemented with detailed, mini-communication plans for the roll out of key initiatives, projects and programs (Action Step 1.3). Think of these as “sub-plans” that, when completed, contribute to achievement of the goals and objectives established in the comprehensive strategic communication plan.

In developing a mini-communication plan for an election campaign, begin by considering any available research (past election results, voter turnout among staff, past exit poll results, etc.) and all elements necessary for planning, implementation and evaluation. Find samples of award-winning communication plans for bond/finance campaigns among the NSPRA Gold Medallion winners ([https://www.nspra.org/awards/gold-medallion-winners](https://www.nspra.org/awards/gold-medallion-winners)), including these recent winners:
• Continue the Greatness (Papillion La Vista Community Schools) - [https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/award-submissions/gold-medallion-19_ne-papillion-la-vista.pdf](https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/award-submissions/gold-medallion-19_ne-papillion-la-vista.pdf)

• Focused on Our Future (West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools) - [https://www.nspra.org/files/%234%20District%20197%20-%20GM%202015%20entry-paymentinforemoved.pdf](https://www.nspra.org/files/%234%20District%20197%20-%20GM%202015%20entry-paymentinforemoved.pdf)

With a bond/finance campaign, these general strategies have proven successful for many school systems:

- **Know your target audiences.** Determine which groups may become opponents if they don’t feel properly informed and which are most likely to support the district at the polls. Consider any research available on what issues they care about and where, when and how they prefer to get their news and information.

  > Include staff as a primary audience in your campaign. Every employee—support staff, teachers, administrators, etc.—should be well-versed on how they, their students and their schools will be positively affected if the bond vote is successful.

  > Identify opinion leaders among staff, parents, business partners, community leaders and civic groups, and initiate a dialogue with them. These people could be the same as those invited to join the proposed key communicator network and the Business Advisory Council (see **Recommendation 6**).

- **Determine which key messages will resonate most with stakeholders** and help move supportive voters to action. Low turnout at the polls is a national crisis, but it can defeat local bond proposals as well. Test possible messages with small focus groups of key stakeholders (lower cost) or through a scientific, random-sample public opinion poll (higher cost). Based on that research, refine key messages about the referendum.

- **Use multiple channels to deliver key messages.**

  > Incorporate social media into communication strategies and tactics, with messaging designed to reach the voting-age stakeholders most likely to interact on those platforms. The HMC-1 Facebook page and Twitter feed provide channels for sharing information quickly and easily. Currently, the district uses these primarily to transmit positive news, but don’t hesitate to use them to keep stakeholders informed of facts and key messages during a referendum campaign.

  > Over the past 10 years, social media has changed the way elections are won or lost, but you can’t overlook more traditional one-way communication tools such as the news media and district and school websites. Refer back to what you know about your target audiences to determine the best ways to reach each group of potential voters.

- **Incorporate two-way communication.**

  Personal interaction and engagement with audiences, when properly planned, can be among the most effective tactics for building understanding and support of a proposal. Avoid formats that create an us-versus-them mentality (e.g., town hall meeting with an administrative dais looking down on the public) and consider instead a structured community conversation with small-group discussions, live video chats on platforms such as Facebook or Crowdcast, or a group idea-sharing platform such as Thoughexchange.
• **Know what you can and can’t say.** In most states, public entities are allowed to explain the reasoning behind the bond proposal, what the dollars will be used for and how much taxes will increase, but they are prohibited from asking voters to “vote yes.” Some also place restrictions on advertising related to the vote. Be aware of Missouri law that outlines what school districts can and cannot do with taxpayer dollars. (In some school communities, non-affiliated groups have instead taken on the role of asking for voters’ support through fliers, mailers and media buys.)

Assuming the election is successful, issue periodic updates on work progress with links to more information on the full scope. Continue to report progress at least quarterly through an easy-to-spot place on the website (perhaps through a data dashboard) as well as through e-newsletters, social media, videos, open house events and during the superintendent’s public appearances as appropriate. Doing so will help raise the profile of these initiatives and demonstrate accountability, transparency and a commitment to the district’s mission.

Following are some award-winning examples of school district webpages designed to keep stakeholders informed after a bond was approved:

• **Bond Program (Spring Independent School District)** - [https://www.springisd.org/bondprogram](https://www.springisd.org/bondprogram)

• **Building a Better Education for Every Student (Gresham-Barlow School District)** - [https://www.gresham-barlowbond.org/](https://www.gresham-barlowbond.org/)

NSPRA has a resource that is helpful in conducting successful referendum campaigns – *Election Success: Proven Strategies for Public Finance Campaigns*. It is available from NSPRA’s Online Store at [www.nspra.org/products](http://www.nspra.org/products).
Recommendation 2:
Work to build a culture of communication throughout the district.

School districts that truly maintain a culture of communication weave today’s best practices for two-way communication into their goals, policies and practices at all operational levels, both internally and externally. Education leaders across the nation are increasingly prioritizing this culture, as suggested by current trends in hiring practices, programs and professional development related to communications.

That is a good trend for many reasons, but one of the chief reasons might be considered “customer satisfaction.” Schools earn their best ratings from parents who feel they are kept informed, have ample opportunities to provide input and that their child’s school is interested in what they have to say, according to a 2016 PDK International study. Similarly, a 2017 Gallup study found that employees are more likely to remain with an organization and contribute to its economic health if they feel actively engaged in the organization—something achieved in large part through communications.

HMC-1 has some elements that are characteristic of a culture of communication. The district’s 2019-2024 Strategic Plan outlines several goals and strategies where success hinges, at least in part, on effective communications. The school board policies related to community relations prioritize citizen involvement, mutually respectful interactions with news media, community partnerships and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders through communications. The communication strengths identified through this communication audit report also demonstrate many practices within the district that are helping create a culture of communication.

That culture of communication is not yet pervasive, though. As this report identifies, there are several challenges preventing HMC-1 from fully realizing the benefits of a culture of communication. For example, an inconsistent range of communication skills among administrators, along with widely diverse quality of school websites and no clear expectations for information to be shared from top to bottom, has caused some of those who most need information to miss it entirely.

The following action steps are aimed at maintaining, strengthening and expanding the culture of communication throughout the district.

Action Step 2.1
| Provide communication training and support for administrators, and evaluate their communication efforts. |

Administrators at all levels spoke positively in focus groups about the support, guidance and resources provided by the Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP), but none mentioned a formal, regular training program to build their skills as communicators and ambassadors for the district and its schools. Given the evolving nature of communication technology, community demographics and staffing, the department should consider providing regular communication skills training for all administrators—both veterans and new hires.

An annual communication “boot camp” for administrators would provide training, tips and practical learning experiences to help them, in their leadership roles, better communicate with stakeholders. It would strengthen their partnerships with communications staff, who
can provide targeted insights relevant to the work of administrators. It would also support greater consistency in communication practice among administrators.

Following are some recommendations for how to structure a communication boot camp:

- **Make it practical and hands-on.** Build your agenda of activities around information they need to know (expectations, policies, primary points of contact, crisis support) and information they want to know (available tools, how to do it, how to find the time). Review what local and national research shows about what families and community members want to know from their schools and school district as well as how they want to receive the information. Discuss best practices for communication on social media and school websites. Provide learn-by-doing opportunities such as holding a live Twitter chat using a district hashtag, on-camera mock media interviews and/or a self-reflection exercise based on where they are as the chief communicator for their school, department or district area.

- **Make it relevant.** Provide real-life examples of how good communication in a Hickman Mills school or department led to positive outcomes for students, staff or the community. Contrast that with real-life examples from other communities where poor communications led to negative outcomes. Allow time for small-group or partner discussions on current communication practices in their schools, departments or district area, challenges they have encountered and ways they might overcome them.

- **Tie it to the big picture.** Review how the goals and objectives of the communication program support the district’s mission and strategic plan. Lead administrators in a conversation about how their communication efforts can support (or hinder) achievement of these wider goals as well as their school or department goals.

- **Schedule it for the greatest level of participation.** Offer communication boot camp during a less busy time of year such as summer vacation and in a convenient location. Keep it to a half-day program to start, and provide refreshments or other incentives such as district-branded door prizes.

To demonstrate the commitment to enhancing communication efforts and underscore its importance, include a communication component in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria. Making a commitment to measure something helps ensure it gets done.

**Action Step 2.2**

*Provide administrators with communication toolkits for major district initiatives.*

Principals and directors who participated in the focus groups were appreciative of talking points and guidance provided by communications staff to assist them during crisis situations and for large, district-wide initiatives. PIOP can expand and improve this support by providing toolkits that empower administrators to communicate with their staff and/or families consistently, proactively, effectively and independently. As the district gets closer to the August bond election, this action step will take on greater importance.

A toolkit for a major initiative might be printed and packaged, but digital platforms such as Google drive and shared, internal networks also allow for inexpensive sharing of resources. With a digital toolkit, the materials can be packaged in a folder that can be shared electronically with instructions on how to
access and use the tool kit. Reminders about the toolkits and how to use them also should be shared during leadership planning meetings as appropriate.

Some examples of content for an administrator’s communication toolkit include:

- Talking points and key messages to ensure that district and school leaders can share consistent, accurate information on important issues. Try to keep it to one or two pages.
- Template presentation slides for use during staff meetings, parent-teacher association meetings, committee meetings, etc.
- Graphics sized appropriately for use on common social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and on school webpages.
- Social media content ideas for posts, including any relevant hashtags.
- Video files, video links and the video embed codes. This will allow for their use during presentations, on social media and on websites where appropriate.
- Fliers for distribution to students and/or staff.

> Keep in mind that some schools and departments may have limited printing capabilities, so provide options that can print equally well in color or black and white. When possible, design these pieces to include a lot of white space and/or limit the complexity and size of photos and graphic images so as to minimize printing time and reduce the use of toner or ink.

> For schools that serve English language learner families, provide both an English version and a translated version that can be copied back to back to help with

#2

Work to build a culture of communication throughout the district.

English-language acquisition. Whenever possible, have a staff member, volunteer or consultant who speaks the language assist with the translation.

- Posters for display in main offices, hallways, staff lounges, public gathering spaces, etc. Share the digital files in an e-toolkit, but if the posters are beyond what can be printed in-house by schools or departments, they may need to be printed by an outside company first and then distributed.
- A mini-communication plan, specific to the initiative, with a timeline of when communications are expected to take place. In addition to sharing deadlines, this also helps schools and departments see how their communication efforts connect to the big picture of the district.

Such toolkits should be shared with administrators’ senior support staff at the same time. Providing timely information to frontline office employees will allow them to better support administrators in clearly articulating actions being taken, answering questions from parents and staff, preventing rumors and correcting misinformation. Such staff also are well-positioned to help identify when a toolkit (or message) needs an administrator’s immediate attention and can initiate conversations about sharing the information with affected families or staff in a timely manner.
**Action Step 2.3**

Offer in-service training for teachers on best practices in parent communications.

This communication audit found that many teachers in HMC-1 see themselves as the “first line of communications” for parents and students. Their perception is accurate; many parents in the focus groups said they would turn first to a teacher with a question or issue. At the same time, several teachers expressed frustration with how much planning time they are now losing to parent communication responsibilities.

HMC-1 teachers are generally satisfied with their amount of professional development, but consideration should be given to providing them with additional professional development on best practices in parent engagement through communications. The training should not focus just on what to do and the tools to do it, but also on how to manage it. In other words, show them how they can have a work life and a personal life while still being responsive to families.

Teachers have access to a variety of tools for communicating with Hickman Mills families: email, texts, Infinite Campus, apps like Class Dojo, social media, school newsletters, etc. It can be overwhelming to manage communications on so many platforms, with all students’ families, while also delivering on instructional expectations. Teachers become frustrated when they feel they are being asked to do more without being provided more time in which to do it. Communications training for teachers should involve guidance on the district’s preferred tools—for greater consistency across the system—and on how to prioritize when selecting among the available tools (e.g., which are preferred by parents, which to use if you’re just getting started or if you’re more experienced with digital engagement). It might also involve a self-reflective exercise where educators consider parts of their daily routine that could be handled more efficiently to allow the necessary time for family communications.

There are emerging challenges to effective teacher communications as demographics shift within the district. To address those challenges, the training might include tips for effectively reaching families whose primary language is not English or who, due to limited income, have less access to digital communication tools. This could have a tremendous payoff in increasing their engagement in their schools.

Perhaps PIOP could partner with a teacher leader at the elementary and secondary levels to develop relevant training content. The training would then be informed by the communications expertise within the office as well as the classroom expertise of educators. Offering it via a brief webinar or video (shared annually and with new teachers throughout the year) and via more in-depth, hands-on workshops would allow greater flexibility to accommodate educators’ busy schedules.

*Making Parent Communication Effective and Easy*, a publication in the NSPRA Online Store (https://www.nspra.org/products), offers tips and samples that may be useful in developing a communications training program for teachers.

**Action Step 2.4**

Align board member communications with the strategic communication plan and the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan to create greater unity within the community.

In its highly visible leadership role, the HMC-1 Board of Education helps set the tone for public perceptions of the district and its operations. Their policy leadership and meeting broadcasts appear to prioritize transparent communications, and a similar sentiment was expressed by members who participated in the
focus groups. Yet when the subject of school board communications came up, internal and external focus groups frequently commented on a perceived division or fracture they feel is negatively affecting the school system.

In its code of ethics, the Board of Education has clearly outlined its expectations related to member communications on behalf of the district. We commend the board for its commitment to serve, communicate, collaborate and actively participate with respect. However, it appears that many community members may not perceive the board as fulfilling this commitment at all times.

While some issues may resist consensus, greater harmony can be found by focusing on areas of commonality rather than areas of discord. It is recommended that board members review their existing communication protocols and identify ways in which their leadership efforts can support the strategic communication plan, particularly those elements pertaining to the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan. Find areas in which the school board, along with district and school leaders, can speak with unity on behalf of Hickman Mills families.

Supporting such unity could involve communications staff providing board members with talking points, key messages, social media graphics, palm cards and other resources—customized to their official capacity—to be used when they are out in the public sphere. It should also include board members being mindful of how their critical comments can impact the public’s image of the district.

If it hasn’t done so already, the school board might also consider arranging for its participation in the Missouri School Boards’ Association in-district training opportunities, particularly those dealing with developing board norms and a board self-evaluation. Board Policy BHA encourages participation in such training. After the experience, communications staff could meet with school board members to discuss what their office can do to support any new ideas arising from that program for demonstrating greater unity within the community.

**Action Step 2.5**

Add a “How This [issue, decision, information] Will Be Communicated” section to agendas for senior staff, principals and school board workshops.

This simple suggestion can help create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. During the focus group discussions, directors expressed some lack of clarity about their roles as communicators when Executive Leadership Team meetings adjourn. A reminder item on the meeting agendas, as suggested, can stimulate discussions about communications and lead to timelier and more strategic communication with key stakeholder groups.

Questions to consider in completing this section include the following:

- What is the issue or problem? Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.
- How will the issue be framed? Consider how the district will outline the issue or problem, and how it will be presented to stakeholders.
- How does this issue/problem affect stakeholders or impact other concerns? Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various stakeholder groups or impact other issues or concerns facing the district.
• Which stakeholder groups need to know about this issue? Identify the stakeholder groups that are the primary audiences for the issue.

• What are the key messages that must be communicated about the issue? Identify the key points that stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key messages or “talking points.”

• How will this issue be communicated? Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with identified stakeholders as well as who is responsible for communicating with each stakeholder group.

• What is the timeline for responding to and communicating about this issue? Develop a timeline for response and communication efforts.

• Who is the main spokesperson on this issue? Identify who will serve as the main spokesperson with news media, staff and other stakeholder groups.

The public information director can and should play an important advisory role in such discussions.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute printed copies for use in stimulating discussion. Over time, these questions will become routine and an integrated part of the district’s communication process.
Recommendation 3:
Strengthen communication between the district, schools and parents.

As is the case in most schools districts, parents in HMC-1 are extremely interested in what is happening in their children's schools and in the district. They have an expectation that information will be shared on a timely basis in a variety of ways. In the focus groups, parents made it clear that there is a need for the district to improve on the quantity and type of information that it shares with parents. The following action steps provide methods for the district and its schools to strengthen current communication efforts with parents.

Principals and teachers also expressed frustration in effectively communicating with parents, citing ever-changing phone numbers and email addresses resulting in a high percentage of “bounce-backs” and undelivered messages. Many school systems ask parents to update their contact information as part of the annual back-to-school process, but parent participation levels can be low among higher grade levels and contact information can and often does change throughout the year.

To tackle this barrier to effective communications, some schools hold mid-year message test campaigns, where they widely advertise that a test message will go out on specific communication platforms on a certain date and any parent who doesn't receive the message should contact their child's school to update their contact information. Others provide (and regularly promote) apps and online portals where parents can login throughout the year and personally update their own contact information for school communications. Another technique that appears to help and that the auditor observed in a few HMC-1 elementary schools is using a sign-in sheet that asks parents for their contact information at every school event. HMC-1 is encouraged to investigate these options to support the collection and maintenance of accurate parent contact information.

Action Step 3.1
Support consistency in the production of school-level parent newsletters, and include district news and key messages in school newsletters.

In the materials provided for the auditor’s review, it appears that not all schools produce a parent newsletter on a regular basis. Some appear to use PeachJar for delivering a school newsletter while some do not. National research and NSPRA experience has shown that parents place a high value on the newsletter—print or digital—that comes from their child's school, and it serves as a primary source of information for many families. While there is always room for some differences and customization, parents expect consistency in how schools communicate with them, especially if they have several children in different schools.

HMC-1 administrators should review current practices with principals and develop a set of common expectations and guidelines to follow for parent newsletter communication. It should be an expectation that all schools produce a parent newsletter on an established and reasonable schedule (e.g., weekly, monthly or quarterly). The Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP) can facilitate this process by providing templates—digital or print—that ensure consistent use of the district's brand standards. As a client district of Blackboard, the district might want to consider using their newsletter design service Smore.

Adding a short “HMC-1 District News for Parents” section in the school newsletters is an effective way to connect parents with district-
level news. District news that is relevant to all schools should be added to their individual newsletters so parents do not have to go to multiple sources to find important information. Parents prefer to use a single source to obtain all the information they want or need. PIOP can prepare regular news items for principals to drop into their school newsletters; the items might be as simple as short, informative headlines (possibly with an illustrative photo) that link to district website articles. To attract parents’ attention, information should be framed in the context of how a program, initiative or change impacts their children.

**Action Step 3.2**

**Increase consistency and reduce quantity in the vehicles and tools used to communicate with parents.**

One of the comments frequently heard in the focus groups was that the district currently uses a variety of vehicles to communicate and connect with parents. While online platforms such as Infinite Campus and Peachjar are generally seen as useful, there is some confusion among parents about how each is used. Parents feel as though they need to use one vehicle for one type of information and another for different information.

This becomes even more complicated when teachers use different online tools and apps, Class Dojo or Remind for example, to communicate with parents. It appears that the tools that teachers use typically vary from school to school and even classroom to classroom.

HMC-1 should consider convening a group of teachers, parents, principals and technology staff to review the communication vehicles and tools that are currently in use across the district. Attempt to develop a set of recommended vehicles/tools for use by all teachers, in an effort to reduce the overall number that parents need to access. It is a huge task and one that many districts are working on, but one that will make it easier for parents to connect with the schools and district.

**Action Step 3.3**

**Establish communication expectations for teachers on posting information in Infinite Campus.**

Parent portals such as Infinite Campus are a popular and valuable communication tool if used regularly and consistently by teachers. Nationwide, a common parent complaint involves teachers not keeping student information current on these systems. That concern was made clear in the focus groups at HMC-1 as well.

These days, almost all teachers communicate in some way with parents, but there can be significant inconsistencies between teachers, grade levels and schools, which often confuses and frustrates parents. Most often, frequency of communication is the issue. Some teachers send a daily message to parents, even if it is brief, while others communicate weekly or less often. Since expectations and guidelines already exist in the district for how often teachers should communicate with parents and/or post information on the portal, consider reviewing and reinforcing those guidelines to remind staff of their obligations. The team assembled under Action Step 3.2 could tackle this issue as well.

Establishing clear expectations and reinforcing them does not completely eliminate the chance for inconsistencies, but it goes a long way toward reducing it.

An often-mentioned frustration for teachers is the prohibition against using their own devices when calling parents. During the work day, parents are typically not home when teachers call from school. Later in the evening, when both parents and teachers are at home,
teachers can’t use their own phones. This issue should be part of the discussion recommended.

**Action Step 3.4**

Continue and expand on efforts to build parents’ awareness of the district’s school safety focus and its behavior and discipline policies.

One of the recurring themes in the focus group discussions had to do with a perception that HMC-1 schools (and certain ones in particular) were “violent and dangerous places.” District leaders are aware of this perception and have made addressing it an area of focus. During school board presentations, Principal Executive Summaries include office discipline referral statistics so that trends and patterns can be observed. Parent/student handbooks lay out the rules and regulations clearly. They are also available on the website.

Still, based on comments the auditor heard, there needs to be an ongoing emphasis on communicating about current efforts to maintain safe school environments as well as about how schools deal with discipline matters, what the rules are and why incidents may be treated in different ways. In particular, parents seem to need a better understanding of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program and its role in student discipline.

Working with principals and district leaders, PIOP can help improve stakeholders’ awareness of HMC-1 schools as safe places to learn and work while also increasing parents’ understanding and support of current behavior and discipline policies by:

- **Developing a safe schools campaign** to increase stakeholder awareness of current district and school efforts to maintain safe and positive learning environments. Highlight any community partnerships or national affiliations that demonstrate the district’s commitment to best practices in school safety. As an example, check out these NSPRA Golden Achievement Award-winning campaigns:

  > “Safe Schools for All” initiative (Contra Costa County Office of Education) - [https://www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/news/spotlight/school_safety](https://www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/news/spotlight/school_safety)
  > #CNUSDIsKind Campaign (Corona-Norco USD) - [https://www.cnusd.k12.ca.us/CNUSDIsKind](https://www.cnusd.k12.ca.us/CNUSDIsKind)

- **Demonstrating PBIS in action** through human interest stories run in district and school newsletters, on websites and on social media, with links to a companion website that provides more detailed information on PBIS practices.

- **Creating “safe schools” infographics** on data that illustrates the positive outcomes from discipline strategies in use. Feature them in presentations, in newsletters, on websites and on social media.

- **Creating “safe schools” slides** that provide a consistent message for school leaders to use during presentations at parent events.

- **Holding community conversations/forums or mind-mapping exercises** around this topic, with the aim of hearing stakeholders’ concerns, ideas and vision for their schools while also helping them to understand the efforts and progress of HMC-1.
Recommendation 4:
Develop a comprehensive marketing plan to raise HMC-1’s profile and solidify its brand.

The key findings in this report identified several challenges for the district’s image among stakeholders. HMC-1 also has experienced a steady decline in enrollment, despite its many curricular offerings, focus on racial equity and reputation for technology innovation. Along with a strategic communication plan (see Recommendation 1), the development and implementation of a comprehensive marketing plan would help ensure current and potential families and employees are aware of the value provided by HMC-1 to students, residents and staff.

Marketing a school district is about helping families, as well as employees, understand why that educational system is their best fit. Developing a marketing plan for HMC-1 should follow a similar four-step strategic planning process to the one outlined in Recommendation 1. In addition, ask yourself questions such as:

- What are our marketing goals and objectives? (Be specific, and make objectives measurable.)
- What data do we have on the needs, interests, location and other demographics of potential families and employees (aka, customers) who would be a good fit for our school district?
- What are our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, as a school district? As individual schools?
- Who are our competitors, and considering our strengths and opportunities, what sets us apart from them?
- What is our brand and brand promise as a school district (see Action Step 4.1)?
- What is our budget for marketing initiatives? (When determining budgets, be sure to consider the cost of not marketing to and attracting new families.)

The marketing plan should be aligned with the district’s overall mission and strategic plan, but one of its goals should be to differentiate HMC-1 from any competitors in the education marketplace. School district quality influenced neighborhood choice for 26 percent of all homebuyers and 50 percent of homebuyers with children in 2017, according to the National Association of REALTORS. Recognizing that many parents and job hunters have a choice about where to live, it is important for the district to communicate all of its positive attributes—its value proposition—in a strategic and effective way.

One place to start the planning process is to review the marketing and branding campaign of a district with similar challenges to HMC-1. The Troup County School District in Georgia had closed some schools after experiencing declining enrollment and a tarnished reputation when it launched the NSPRA Gold Medallion-winning marketing/branding campaign available at https://www.nspra.org/sites/default/files/award-submissions/gold-medallion-19_gatroup-county-school-system-low.pdf.

Any marketing initiatives should be led by or handled in coordination with PIOP to keep communications and marketing efforts in alignment.
# Action Step 4.1

Define the district’s desired brand.

One of the themes that emerged from both internal and external focus groups was the need for the district to do a better job telling its own story. While participants said the image and talk about the district was often negative, they also noted that the perception did not always mirror reality.

The first step in this process is to clearly define the district’s “brand identity”—the reputation that you want to be known for in the community. Your brand identity is how you wish to be perceived by others and what each school’s personality is. The district’s brand is not a logo or tag line, although both elements are part of communicating a brand. A brand is the combination of design, words and symbols that are used to create an image or reputation that describes HMC-1’s schools and differentiates it from other districts.

If budget permits, consider using the services of a marketing consultant to assist in defining the brand and developing the logos and materials needed to communicate it. The district may also be able to find a parent or community member with expertise in marketing to assist. In some communities, the local chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA) offers free services once a year to a non-profit or government agency. During the branding process, clearly articulate your desired brand and develop messages which tell the district’s story that can be easily communicated by all employees and parents.

- **Identify your value proposition.** A school district’s value proposition is what you promise to give to your audience. What are the benefits to students attending your schools, or even the benefits for parents who are a part of your school community? What is it about your schools that sets them apart from your competition? Think about your district’s unique identity. Do you offer something that no other schools in your area are able to provide? You should be able to give your value proposition in one brief, concise phrase or sentence. As your “tag line,” make sure this message is used consistently across all media. Most importantly, don’t change it frequently or confuse it by using multiple tag lines. That seems to be happening now, with three tag lines used in different places in HMC-1, including “Building Our Brightest Future,” “Together Towards Tomorrow” (the annual theme for the current school year) and “Shaping Our Future” (a special campaign tag line). Find examples of corporate value propositions at these links:

  > [25 Companies Who Absolutely Nailed Their Unique Value Proposition](#)
  > [31 Value Propositions You Wish You Had](#)
  > [7 of the Best Value Propositions We’ve Ever Seen](#)

- **Identify your brand identity.** Your brand identity is how you wish to be perceived by others, and essentially, what your district’s personality is. You want to make sure that you leave a good impression. In order to do this, define your district and school goals,
strengths and weaknesses, and make sure you are meeting the expectations of your audience. Your brand is conveyed through everything: your logo and how it is used around the district, uniforms, and even your school buses. All of these are part of your brand and are important in creating a visually memorable and positive experience for anyone researching the district.

- **Create a brand guide.** A brand guide sets the standard for presenting your brand to the public. In a school setting where hundreds or even thousands of employees represent your district, a formal brand guide will support consistency and compliance when enforcing the district’s brand throughout all print and digital channels. Guidance might range from official district colors and approved variations on the logo to consistent brand elements (for the layout and design of all outreach materials) and preferred writing styles.

  - Consider modeling the simple, visual format of Highline Public Schools’ identity and style guide: [https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/communications/brand-guidelines](https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/communications/brand-guidelines)
  
  - Consider providing a website for internal and external use such as Harvard Community Unit School District 50’s online identity guide: [https://www.cusd50.org/identity/identity-guide/](https://www.cusd50.org/identity/identity-guide/)

School districts are different from companies in that schools often see themselves as independent organizations. Business cards, letterhead and website design are areas that campuses often “do their own thing.” Once brand guidelines have been established, clearly communicate the district’s brand identity, standards and expectations to stakeholders, particularly staff, volunteers, families and outside vendors. Make sure the information is easy to find for any visitor to the district and school websites and on the staff intranet. Publicize the brand guidelines and explain their purpose to principals, who can help manage adherence to them.

**Action Step 4.2**

Refresh or reimagine the HMC-1 logo design to more clearly communicate the district’s brand identity today.

The current, official HMC-1 logo is very geometric, with tilted triangular shapes featuring the words “Hickman Mills” running horizontally and “C-1 Schools” at an angle. (In graphic design, triangles are often used to represent balance or imbalance, depending on their position; movement in a particular direction; and strength.) The logo is often, but not always, used with a tag line, “Providing a Foundation for a Proudly Diverse and Historic Community.” Uniformly, the logo is used in black and gold.

An effective logo design should create an immediate visual impression of HMC-1 as a model of excellence. As district leaders consider the brand identity they wish to communicate to stakeholders (see Action Step 4.1), consideration should be given as to whether the current logo is in sync with the vibrant school district that it represents. The auditor’s findings suggest the district has an opportunity and the need for a redesign effort that engages key stakeholders in the process of creating a dynamic logo that instantly communicates the positivity and energy of the district.

Development of such a logo may require stakeholder involvement to identify the values it should reflect, but the final product should be produced professionally by a graphic designer. Consistent use of the logo across the district should be reinforced through brand guidelines.
**Action Step 4.3**

Highlight the successes of HMC-1 students and staff with a “Points of Pride” campaign.

As we noted earlier, focus group participants were genuinely concerned about the negative image of the school district, but they also believe HMC-1 is not “telling its story” as well as it could be, particularly with some elements of the community.

As a complement to the #HMCProud hashtag, another strategy for tackling the image issue is to create ongoing “Points of Pride” that clearly, consistently and frequently communicates successes. “Points of Pride” can be used by employees, key communicators, board members and real estate and property management agents as they answer questions about the schools. They can serve as a reference for parents in deciding whether their children will attend HMC-1 schools.

While test scores are one measurement of success, there are many others that the district can focus on as well. These include: awards that students and teachers have received; special recognitions bestowed on the district; graduates who have gone on to receive advanced degrees or achieve significant professional accomplishments; service projects students have completed; and business investment in the schools. The district is already promoting many of those topics, but the effort appears to be scattered. Their visibility and impact could be heightened if they were part of a more coordinated effort.

Key to this effort is sharing “Points of Pride” with internal audiences. Teachers and support staff all need to know positive information about the district and its schools so they are prepared to speak with pride and answer questions, whether they are on the job or in the supermarket checkout line. One way to involve staff in this effort is to conduct a series of brainstorming sessions with principals, teacher leaders, and other appropriate individuals on the topic, “What’s Right with HMC-1 Schools?” Focus on specific achievements by students and staff that can be supported with data that demonstrates the district’s successes and illustrates how strategic plan goals are being implemented. Develop as long a list as possible.

Also look back at HMC-1’s long history. What famous graduates of the schools can be identified? Are there successful graduates from more recent years who could be highlighted? What special recognitions have the schools, staff or students earned? Highlight these in #HMCProud and also look for additional ways to communicate these “Points of Pride.” Using multiple channels is important because although social media use in HMC-1 is growing, the auditor’s findings indicate that it is not yet a primary source of information for the majority of stakeholders.

Replicate this brainstorming idea at each school. Consider doing this monthly and focus on different “points” each month.

Following are some ideas to start with for communicating successes:

- Develop a speech or presentation around “Points of Pride” that can be delivered to civic organizations, parent groups and other appropriate audiences.
- Develop a “Points of Pride” section on the homepage of the website and place it up front. Update the list monthly. Encourage schools to do the same on their individual websites. Having all such items together in one prominent place would have cumulative impact (Wow! Look at all of this!) rather than having them scattered.
- Develop a HMC-1 “Points of Pride” flier/brochure, with links to the website, and distribute it to real estate offices, elected officials, businesses and other key
audiences. Use it as a handout for speeches and in information provided to new families and employees.

- Encourage schools to create a “Wall of Fame” in a visible campus location or virtually on their websites. Include photos and short summaries of accomplishments of students, staff and alumni.

- Write an op-ed article for the Kansas City Star and the Martin City Telegraph on HMC-1 “Points of Pride.”

- Ask alumni to submit testimonials on what an education in HMC-1 has meant to them. Include these testimonials on websites and in publications and share them with key audiences. Create short video testimonials for use on social media.

- Post “Points of Pride” history items and photos on social media for Throwback Thursday.

- Highlight one or two “Points of Pride” at each Board of Education meeting.

**Action Step 4.4**

**Develop and implement an outreach campaign to real estate and property management agents.**

Many school districts have made a concerted effort to nurture strong relationships with real estate agents, which enables them to promote the merits of the district and accurately respond to questions about the schools. Because of the high percentage of rental properties in Hickman Mills, this effort should also include property management agencies as well. (The terms are used interchangeably here.) Real estate agents are often among the first points of contact a family or individual has in a community, and they play an important role in creating a positive “first impression” of the schools. It is important for them to present accurate information about HMC-1 in their discussions with prospective buyers or renters. It is particularly important that correct zoning information be shared with prospective home-buyers.

When it comes to selling your school district to prospective homebuyers, realtors are subject to a major legal block known as the Fair Housing Act. This federal law protects people from discrimination because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability or familial status during housing-related activities such as buying or renting a home. It means realtors can’t tell parents one neighborhood has better schools than another or that one home is in a more desirable district. Some realtors won’t even tell homebuyers whether the home they’re touring is in a neighborhood with lots of kids.

Realtors can, however, provide families with third-party tools that empower them to decide on their own whether a home and its schools are a good fit. This is where HMC-1 can work to promote its image as a quality school system.

One way to share information with local real estate agents is an information seminar. Invite agents to a breakfast or luncheon meeting once or twice a year at a school. Offer a bus tour of the district or select schools to highlight specific programs. Provide them with information packets (including Points of Pride material mentioned earlier) and a checklist of information that is available on the district website. Consider providing agents with materials that they can give to clients when showing homes in the district. By working with the state or regional Realtors association, it may be possible to obtain continuing education credit for the seminar, which provides further incentive for agents to attend. The district also might consider investigating possibilities for partnering with a real estate group to provide information sessions or seminars.
Another indirect but potentially highly effective method of getting information to realtors is by updating the information about HMC-1 posted on district and school rating websites. For a busy realtor, online school rating websites are among the easiest and legally safest tools to suggest when families ask about local schools. Many property search engines provide school comparison data sourced from these sites as well, with GreatSchools.org dominating on sites such as Realtor.com, Zillow.com, and Trulia.com. Be sure to check the HMC-1 school reviews on the most commonly used sites in the region, and wherever possible, follow the steps to claim your school profiles, update the content, promote positive ratings among your families and begin improving how the schools are marketed to potential homebuyers.

Real estate agents are key communicators who need to be kept informed and updated on new developments in HMC-1.

**Action Step 4.5**

**Develop and offer “See for Yourself” school tours.**

Research indicates that people who have recently been inside a school building have a better impression of the school than those who have not. Without a direct connection to their local schools, residents otherwise are basing their impressions on media coverage, social media rumors and neighborhood gossip.

A school tour is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighborhood residents and prospective families while promoting the benefits of HMC-1 schools. It allows the school to showcase engaged and focused students, excellent instruction, orderly hallways and fiscal accountability to taxpayers. As the August bond election approaches, such tours could also highlight needed improvements so that taxpayers see first-hand why various elements are on the ballot.

HMC-1 should consider developing guidelines and a schedule for offering school tours to community members, particularly those without an existing connection to the schools such as parents of preschoolers, senior citizens and empty-nesters. Tour dates could be anchored around relevant events such as American Education Week. Provide opportunities for visitors to interact with all staff, including clerical, custodial and instructional. Training should be provided to key staff and student leaders to serve as tour guides.
Recommendation 5:
Strengthen the engagement of staff members in the district’s decision-making process.

Many staff members in the internal focus groups expressed concern with the quantity and quality of engagement opportunities provided to district employees. While some staff members believe there are not adequate opportunities for staff to provide input as part of the decision-making process, others were concerned that the input collected is not listened to or incorporated into decisions. An illustrative statement of their feedback was that, “We get lots of surveys, but I never hear how they use them.”

Effectively engaging staff members in decision-making processes will ultimately serve to strengthen trust, connection and transparency throughout the district. When planning to do so, though, there are three key considerations that must be considered first:

- Do not ask for input from stakeholders if a decision has already been made. When districts decide on a general direction for a particular issue and then seek input, stakeholders can easily feel their input does not matter because the decision has already been made. (That concern was voiced in both teacher and principal focus groups in HCM-1.) In these cases, stakeholders feel they are being sold an idea or asked to rubber stamp it, rather than being provided the opportunity to help shape a decision. It is important to seek input on all key issues and to listen to that input as part of the decision-making process.

- Give stakeholder input appropriate consideration in shaping decisions or directions for the district. In some cases, district leaders may already have a strong sense of what decision is necessary, but choose to seek public input before finalizing it. When this is done and stakeholder input favors a different solution or choice from what has initially been considered, leaders have an interesting dilemma. They can choose to continue with the original plan or listen to the input and consider alternative options. Asking for input and then ignoring it is the quickest way to cause stakeholders to disengage from the district. Requesting input does not mean district leaders must follow the public’s suggestions. However, that input must be given due consideration and if it is not actionable, then the reasons why should be explained along with the rationale for the final decision. It will be difficult to get stakeholders to share thoughts and ideas in the future if they feel the process is meaningless.

- Clarify where the final decision authority lies when seeking input. In most cases, the Board or administrators seek input to gather information in order to make a better decision. Confusion and frustration may enter the process if those asked to offer input mistakenly perceive that they are “making” the decision. To avoid such a situation, it is important to clearly outline why input is being sought, how the input will be used, and who will make the actual decision. If these positions are clearly defined on the front end of the process, it will be less likely that those providing input will misunderstand their role.

The concepts of public engagement and transparency are compelling for educators because they require school districts to engage stakeholders in meaningful ways that build trust and create a civic investment in our schools. With the following action steps, HMC-1 can strengthen its commitment to transparency and engagement, and find more ways to
authentically seek input from stakeholders and engage them in the work of the district.

**Action Step 5.1**

**Promote, support and train staff in serving as ambassadors of the district.**

All employees share the role of representing the district through their personal interactions with community members, whether they intend to or not. For that reason, serving as ambassadors for the district and its schools is not just the responsibility of the superintendent, the public information director, other district administrators or principals. Every employee has a responsibility to help improve communication with external stakeholders as well as internal colleagues.

To be specific, it was concerning that so few employees were aware of the upcoming bond election. Frontline employees (e.g., teachers, secretaries, custodians) are viewed as among the most trusted sources of news and information about the schools. As plans are made to communicate about the need for the bond issue, the district must take steps to ensure that all employees, particularly those on the front lines, have the information they need to serve as HMC-1 ambassadors.

To achieve the greatest level of support in the community, every HMC-1 employee needs to accept their role as an ambassador and see themselves as a member of the team—not as just a “fan.” To accomplish this goal, PIOP should develop a mini-communication plan and messaging to help to communicate this concept. For elements of the plan, consider the following ideas:

- **Create and present an “HCM-1 schools ambassador” toolkit as part of the new employee orientation process.** This toolkit should contain basic facts and information such as district and school enrollments, number of staff employed and revenue sources, the district’s strategic plan and a summary of progress on its goals, brief summaries of special initiatives and programs, and other noteworthy background and information about the district. By ensuring employees have the information they need to understand district operations, HCM-1 can continue expanding its informed and engaged team of ambassadors.

- **Distribute updated “HCM-1 schools ambassador” toolkits to all district employees** at the beginning of each new school year to remind employees of their important role in communications.

- **Offer professional development in how to deliver exemplary customer service** to internal (fellow employees) and external (parents, taxpayers, volunteers, etc.) stakeholders during the on-boarding process for all new employees.

- **Have district leaders continually stress the role of all employees as ambassadors** for the district and its schools during regular staff meetings and annual staff events.
When effectively communicated, most staff members can see their role in positively communicating about the schools and helping to build allies for the district. This can be an extraordinarily powerful tactic and can transform the culture of the district.

**Action Step 5.2**

**Communicate the process of incorporating staff input into decision-making.**

As noted earlier in this recommendation, many staff members in the focus groups commented that they do not always know how or if their input is used in the decision-making process.

HMC-1 should clearly communicate how input will be considered as it is gathered, and, after it is summarized, how it will be incorporated into a decision. Have an intentional plan at the beginning of the input-gathering process for how information will be shared with participants before and after a decision is made. Other districts have shared this information by posting a summary of the results after conducting a major survey or articles that demonstrate the results of committee discussions in the context of an announced decision. Sharing the results of this communication audit report, as well as any district plans for moving forward, with all focus group participants is another way for the district to show it incorporates staff (and public) input into the decision-making process.

These steps are necessary to make sure staff members are aware that their input is being used and is a valuable part of the process. In addition, it is critical for staff members to see how their input influenced the final decision. Without this, it is often challenging to encourage employees to participate in engagement opportunities in the future.

**Action Step 5.3**

**Enlist principals and directors to have “rounding” conversations to solicit input from staff.**

The practice of “rounding” can effectively gather input quickly from staff members. A rounding conversation is a check-in conversation that can be focused on a particular topic. Here’s how it might work to gather input from staff members: The district’s Executive Leadership Team may be discussing an idea, and staff input is needed to inform the decision. The team develops two or three questions to gather quick input. Each principal and director would then be asked to find a dozen or more staff members to answer the questions. The responses are delivered to the ELT for consideration in the decision-making process. Again, as stated above, it is important that staff members see how this input affected the decision so they are more likely to participate in the future.
Recommendation 6:
Develop a key communicator network that emphasizes and strengthens relationships.

A key communicator network is a formal program designed to expand and build relationships with influential members of the community and can be a useful two-way communication tool. Currently, HMC-1 has two efforts that may have been initially designed to fill this role, but the auditor’s review finds that they could be much more effective. They are the Superintendent’s Community Advisory Council (meets twice a year) and the Ambassadors program (essentially dormant and not functioning as described on district website).

The district should consider extending its outreach by developing a formal HMC-1 Key Communicator Network, replacing those two groups. The network would focus on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with key stakeholders within the community and district. These individuals, in turn, can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of genuine ambassadors for the district.

What makes this type of group effective is that members are respected and influential citizens from specific groups of constituents, are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and are considered a believable and credible source of accurate information. This group could serve as a sounding board for district leaders to test new ideas, as a conduit to deliver key messages to constituents and as an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns.

Action Step 6.1
Identify influential opinion leaders who represent diverse community groups and perspectives.

The individuals invited to participate should be credible members of target audiences identified by the district: people whom others go to for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size (or divided into smaller sub-groups to be met with separately) to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building. Several community members who participated in the audit focus groups would be good key communicators. Some said they were members of the existing CAC, but noted that it should meet more often in order to be truly useful. Those comments, and others, helped to inform this recommendation.

To organize an HMC-1 Key Communicator Network, ask each principal, district office administrator and school board member to recommend two or three people who are well-known, respected in their neighborhood or specific community, and who have an interest in the schools. Some names are likely to be suggested multiple times. To add depth to the network, ask those individuals whom they consider to be opinion leaders in the community.

Parent leaders play a very important communication role throughout the district and should be represented in the Key Communicator Network. HMC-1’s network could also include representatives from retired teachers and support staff, senior citizens and key minority leaders in the community. The list could also include clergy from local churches, civic groups and the many non-profit organizations that already support the district. The total group should be representative of as many segments of the community as possible.
SchoolMessenger seems to be the most common e-communications tool in HCM-1, and a separate list could be created for your key communicators. In addition to disseminating information, updates can alert the group to breaking news (e.g., crisis situations) and help dispel rumors and provide accurate information and key messages about major school district initiatives. Key communicators should also receive any regular publications such as the C-1 School Messenger.

Conduct an annual evaluation of the program. It’s important to ascertain whether the Key Communicator Network is functioning effectively and meeting the district’s needs as well as those of the participants. Questions that might be asked of key communicator participants could include:

- How satisfied are you with the operation of the HMC-1 Key Communicator Network?
- Is the information provided to you accurate and timely?
- How frequently should we meet?
- Are the e-updates serving your needs?
- Who else should be invited to join the Key Communicator Network?
- How can we improve the Key Communicator Network?

The goal is to establish a two-way communication network so that key communicators become better informed and are able to receive and provide prompt responses to questions, concerns or issues that arise in the community. NSPRA offers a step-by-step guide for creating a key communicator network, A Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Key Communicator Programs, which may be helpful. It is available in the NSPRA Online Store at www.nspra.org/products.

The potential members should receive a personal letter from the superintendent and Board of Education president outlining the group’s purpose and inviting their participation. Include information about how you want them to RSVP. Make personal phone calls to follow up after a week or 10 days if there is no immediate response.

**Action Step 6.2**

**Orient, regularly update and annually check in with key communicators.**

To launch the network, hold an orientation meeting where the superintendent discusses participants’ important role as two-way conduits for information as well as the district’s mission and strategic plan. Encourage key communicators to report concerns they hear in the community, especially examples of inaccurate information or misinformation about the school district or individual schools. Key communicators should be given a hotline number or email address (usually the public information office) to contact if they need information or hear about erroneous statements or rumors that need correcting. Whenever such information is reported, district leaders should determine the validity of it, take action if appropriate, and inform the Key Communicator Network of the district’s response.

Consider scheduling quarterly meetings with the Key Communicator Network. Depending on the number of leaders identified, it may be more effective to break them into smaller groups that meet at different times. This can help to build more personal relationships with this important stakeholder group.

Develop a regular electronic update specifically for the Key Communicator Network. Once opinion leaders agree to participate in this type of communication network, it is important to keep them updated with current information.
Develop a key communicator network that emphasizes and strengthens relationships.

As the process to develop the strategic communication plan unfolds (see Action Step 1.2), district leaders should make plans to reach out to the business community in a more systematic and organized effort. The Community Partners page on the website lists 69 partners, ranging from individuals to churches to non-profits to major corporations. The focus of many of these partnership efforts appears to be on meeting the basic needs of students and families such as for clothing, housing, health care and counseling.

This invaluable but somewhat narrow view of community partnerships could be expanded by forming a Business Advisory Council to help the business community understand the unique financial challenges facing the district and to enlist their support in communicating that information to the wider community. The district might also solicit members’ advice and input on strategic directions for budget and finance matters that would be appropriate for governmental, public agencies. This could be considered a sub-group of the HMC-1 Key Communicator Network, with a focus limited to business, budget and finance matters.

- For possible members, ask the South Kansas City Chamber of Commerce for their suggestions. Reach out to existing business partners to see if they would extend their involvement in this new endeavor.
- Have the group—ideally 15-20 individuals—meet quarterly with the superintendent, the director of business and finance, and the director of PIOP.
- Following its initial organizational meeting, the group should be asked to select a chairman who, together with the superintendent, would jointly develop future agendas.

Improving communication with business leaders would help rebuild public trust and confidence that appears to have been eroded in recent years. In the external focus group discussions, participants were not sure that the district had considered all of its options related to the budget reductions and school closings made last spring. Some participants thought the district had not solicited sufficient public input and had “rushed to judgment.” In light of that public sentiment, having the support of the business community will be critical to the success of any future bond issues. Validation and an endorsement from trusted business leaders would go a long way to building support among voters.

Whenever the topic of budget cuts, declining enrollment and school closings came up in focus groups, the auditor also heard about the Cerner Corporation and the impact on HMC-1’s budget of the tax abatement for their new campus at the former Bannister Mall. Shortly after the auditor’s visit, the Kansas City Star ran a detailed story covering the issue. Since that story ran, district leaders and representatives of Cerner have met to exchange information and viewpoints. That outreach effort should
be applauded, and as Cerner’s development continues to grow, it will be imperative for the district to maintain open lines of communication. For that reason, it is strongly suggested they be represented on this advisory council.
Recommendation 7
Continue efforts to make the HMC-1 website the go-to source of district information.

Typically, the website is one of a school district’s most important communication tools. The site serves as the first point of contact for prospective students and families as well as community members. It also is a primary information source for outside organizations such as the news media, agencies, associations and business groups seeking facts and information about the district and schools.

When focus groups participants were asked where they turn for news and information about HMC-1, very few mentioned the district website (https://www.hickmanmills.org/). When asked about the district website, most said it contained a good deal of useful information, but they found the information cumbersome to find, buried too deep with too many clicks and too much scrolling. Because the district’s logo colors are black and gold, and those colors dominate the design, the site appears dark and can be off-putting. It also forces the use of reverse white on black text, not considered a good design element. When a new logo is approved, assuming it will use bright colors, this problem should be resolved.

HMC-1 should keep the site content fresh, keep the design dynamic and continue seeking ways to strengthen this important communication channel as a go-to resource of information and news for key stakeholders.

Action Step 7.1
Regularly evaluate the website user experience.

Gathering input from groups of users is helpful in assessing the effectiveness of a website. With the key findings in this audit report, HMC-1 already has some preliminary input. For example, the district should consider addressing two concerns noted in the focus groups. First, when the website is viewed on a computer screen, the icon bar is “below the centerfold” and does not appear when the main page opens. Second, the Quick Links and Upcoming Events sections are at the bottom of the page when viewed on a computer screen or mobile device. Those are usually two high-interest elements and should be more prominently placed.

The district could also host in-person website user sessions annually with different audiences to gather feedback. Bring together small groups of users, including parents, staff and students, and ask them to complete user-specific tasks on the website (e.g., Find your child's teacher page and information about registering for school. Find human resources forms and links to staff applications.). Ask specific questions about:

• What information they access online;
• Why, when and how often they visit the district and school sites and portals; and
• How they would like content to be organized.

With all participants, discuss how user-friendly the experience was and how it can be improved. Ask users what additional information, features and functionality might be added.

Continual user testing and feedback is an important part of the process to ensure the website is seen and utilized as a primary
communication resource. This type of research should enable HMC-1 to make enhancements to the site, learn how the site can be better marketed to attract more users, and further the goal of improving two-way communication with key stakeholders.

**Action Step 7.2**

Incorporate marketing components into the website to reinforce the HMC-1 brand.

The HMC-1 website can be used more strategically to engage the community, attract families and recruit new staff. As detailed in **Recommendation 4**, the district would benefit from a concerted effort to more effectively market itself. The district webpage should be a central element in that effort.

Consider creating a “Welcome” page targeted to new and potential families and employees. Highlight why people should choose HMC-1 as a place to live or work. Include information about exemplary programs, information about the area, links to community sites, video testimonials and a welcome message from the superintendent and Board of Education president. An example is the Minnetonka (Minn.) Public Schools **About Minnetonka Schools webpage** and **New Family Checklist**. This type of web content also can serve as a helpful resource that real estate agents can point their clients to for information about HMC-1.

Many website visitors look for basic information such as enrollment, demographics and assessment score highlights. While the district has such a document called “HMC-1 Fast Facts,” it is buried several clicks deep in the “About Us” section. Consider adding a direct link to the front page that will enable people to access a page containing this data, along with information to market HMC-1 that the district decides to include in the Points of Pride program.

**Action Step 7.3**

Expand the budget/finance content with an emphasis on user-friendly information.

One element often missing on school district websites is budget/finance material written with the public and parents in mind; in other words, from a layman’s perspective.

Currently, HMC-1’s **budget information webpage** contains only the bare essentials such as the annual budget document and yearly audit reports. Such documents may satisfy state reporting requirements, but they do little to help the taxpayer understand where the district’s dollars come from and how they are allocated. School district budgets are typically the largest in the community, and they often draw special scrutiny. Building trust, understanding and increasing transparency in the district’s finances are more important than ever given recent budget reductions and school closings.

Consider developing an online “Citizens Guide to Understanding HMC-1’s Budget.” Write content with the layperson in mind, and emphasize the use of infographics and simple, clearly labeled charts and graphs that visually communicate information. Include a FAQ section, and consider allowing readers to submit questions online that district leaders answer and then add to the FAQ.

These school districts offer excellent examples of how to explain complex financial material in an easy-to-understand format.

- Houston ISD in Texas - [https://www.houstonisd.org/budget](https://www.houstonisd.org/budget)
**Action Step 7.4**  
Expand the use of video as a communication vehicle on the website.

Video is an increasingly effective way to quickly connect with stakeholders and to share information in a fun and interesting way. HMC-1 has begun to use videos over the past year or so, and many are engaging and authentic. However, they are scattered across the website and hard to find. At the time of the auditor’s review in late fall, the only video on the home page was the superintendent’s welcome message to students from August. The link to HMC-1’s YouTube channel is at the very bottom of the page and when accessed, appears unorganized. Additionally, the collection of board meeting videos has a separate YouTube location.

In order to take better advantage of its potential, the district should place all of its videos in one convenient, district-branded location, and then categorize groups of videos into playlists by topic or subjects such as In the News, Awards and Recognitions, Important Announcements, Schools, etc. As an additional consideration, Board of Education meetings could be streamed live first and then archived for future viewing on the district’s video page. Currently, the meetings are recorded and made available in the board section of the website, usually by the following day.

For more ideas, consider these examples of effective use of video on a district website:

- A North Carolina school district features videos “top of the fold” on its district homepage at [https://www.buncombesschools.org/](https://www.buncombesschools.org/).

**Action Step 7.5**  
Ensure that district and school websites are ADA-compliant and maintain the responsive design.

The HMC-1 website design is mobile-responsive, and key webpage structures stack appropriately when viewed on mobile devices instead of on a computer screen. This best practice in website design should be maintained.

Like other school districts in the country, HMC-1 also must make sure its websites are accessible to the disabled. Such accessibility improvements make for a better user experience for all users as well as for those with visual or hearing impairments. A random sampling of district website pages suggest most are compliant and provide webpage-based content, but a few include embedded PDFs, a scanned form PDF, PDFs with multiple document issues when run through an accessibility checker or missing content (e.g., Human Resources e-forms) that would challenge screen reader technology.

HMC-1 currently engages in several good-faith efforts to maintain compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. For example, PIOP staff provide annual training...
for all media specialists in the district, and the department also allocates staff time monthly to review school websites for issues. Such training and regular reinforcement of best practices should continue to help ensure all those with access to update district and school websites are doing so appropriately.

Following are some additional steps to consider when attempting to identify, correct and prevent website accessibility issues:

- **Audit school websites and identify barriers to accessibility.** The results will provide a place to begin corrections. Look for errors, and tackle those as a first priority.
  
  > Review web content accessibility (Section 508) guidelines.
  > Consult the compliance checklist developed by the Worldwide Web Consortium: [http://webaim.org/standards/wcag/checklist](http://webaim.org/standards/wcag/checklist)
  > Test website pages with a website accessibility checker (e.g., Monsido at [https://monsido.com/](https://monsido.com/) or Wave 3.0 at [http://wave.webaim.org/](http://wave.webaim.org/)).

- **Create an action plan to correct any existing online barriers**, and include a timeline for compliance.
  
  > All documents posted must be compliant, including PDFs and videos. This means that documents should be able to be “read” by a screen reader so visually impaired users can understand what a document says. This usually entails tagging all titles and sub-titles in PDFs, and closed captioning videos.
  > Continue training all webmasters to build understanding of compliance issues. Promote standards for what is expected of those managing websites.
  > Develop an accessibility policy, and post a notice to persons with disabilities about how to request access to online information or functionality that is currently inaccessible. School Webmasters has provided a template accessibility policy at [https://tb2cdn.schoolwebmasters.com/acct_1/site_28456/Website-Accessibility-Policy-Sample-simplified.pdf](https://tb2cdn.schoolwebmasters.com/acct_1/site_28456/Website-Accessibility-Policy-Sample-simplified.pdf). View sample accessibility policies from other school systems at these links:
    - Fairfax County Public Schools - Accessibility statement is linked in the template footer for all webpages ([https://www.fcps.edu/about-fcps/policies-regulations-and-notices/web-accessibility-guidelines](https://www.fcps.edu/about-fcps/policies-regulations-and-notices/web-accessibility-guidelines)).
    - Seattle Public Schools - Accessibility statement is linked in the template footer for all webpages ([https://www.seattleschools.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=627&pageId=26610457](https://www.seattleschools.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=627&pageId=26610457)).
  > Plan for scheduled, ongoing audits to assure that school websites remain accessible.

- **Seek assistance from disabled individuals to test web pages** for compliance issues. This might be part of the website user sessions recommended in Action Step 7.1.

  Keep in mind that when a website template is designed to be responsive and mobile-friendly, that does not guarantee that the content posted on the site is accessible and up to ADA standards. The district should consult with its website vendor, Blackboard, regarding the measures it takes and any support/training it offers to ensure the district website remains accessible.
Recommendation 8

Enhance communication with residents without children enrolled in HMC-1.

Residents who do not currently have children enrolled in district schools often have a different perspective and see the district and the issues it faces through a different lens than staff and families. This was true of the focus group participants in HMC-1. Several of the community focus group participants who are involved with the schools believed their views of the district are far more positive than those of many of their neighbors and colleagues.

Nationally, more than 70% of adults live in households without children, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This translates to a majority of the constituency for school districts not having a regular, direct connection to their schools as parents. Yet they have considerable power when it comes to voting in school elections.

The following suggestions are intended to enhance communication between HMC-1 and its residents who do not have children in school, but as voters and taxpayers, do have a vested interest in the vitality of their local community.

Action 8.1

Develop a monthly publication/mailing to share information with all district residents.

Residents without children enrolled in HMC-1 do not get regular information from the district and often rely on local news media for school system news. While the information in the media may be helpful, the auditor’s review found that the news stories do not always communicate the same level of detail and the positive messaging HMC-1 wants to share. Focus group participants also noted that local newspaper stories tend to focus more on the negative side of issues, and in their opinion, do not tell the whole story.

HMC-1 can deliver its messages directly to community residents by:

- **Capitalizing on existing partnerships to share district news.** During focus group discussions, many participants representing non-profit groups affiliated with HMC-1 indicated they would be willing to place news articles, features and/or guest columns in their newsletters and publications.

- **Expanding C-1 School Messenger content to serve the interests of both internal and external audiences** or possibly developing an entirely new e-publication focused on news of interest to the wider community.

> Continue allowing community members to subscribe to receive C-1 School Messenger, and clearly promote that as an option on the district website and in all community settings with a district presence. PIOP staff indicated that there used to be a self-sign-up button for C-1 School Messenger on the district website when the e新聞letter was created and distributed via a different vendor. After switching to a new vendor late last school year, the sign-up process for community members now requires them to contact PIOP directly to be added manually to the distribution list. It is recommended that the district work with its new vendor on options for returning to a self-sign-up model for community subscribers. See a sign-up page example for a district community newsletter at [https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/school-construction/get-informed/enewsletter](https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/school-construction/get-informed/enewsletter).
> Consider offsetting production costs by selling ad space to local businesses or by finding a sponsor. See an example of a school district e-newsletter with sponsors at https://contac2/2NuG5Jj.

- **Creating a print newsletter** that is distributed three or four times a year to all residents via bulk mail. While the cost of producing, printing and mailing a paper publication can be high, a widely distributed print newsletter can reach residents who, though lack of a current connection to their local schools, are not motivated to follow the social media channels or visit the websites of the district and its schools. This type of publication is typically requested by older residents.

> A publication of this type should be designed to have a longer shelf-life, with big-picture stories and analysis on district-related education topics and news rather than just the latest school event pictures.

> Include relatable information in layman’s terms.

> Cover a variety of topics, but be sure there is something of interest for each of the district’s key external stakeholder groups.

> Design it to serve a dual purpose as a marketing material that demonstrates your value proposition and brand identity (see Action Step 4.1).

> Consider offsetting production costs by selling ad space to local businesses or by finding a sponsor.

- **Producing over-sized news postcards** to be mailed to all district households via bulk mail. Some school districts around the country have found success with this strategy. Developing and mailing a postcard is usually less expensive than a full printed newsletter and can be an effective way to deliver information on a more regular basis.

> Instead of having longer stories, focus on key messages on two or three current topics, with links to the district website for more information.

> These pieces would need an attractive graphic design to be eye-catching and easy to read.

These options can also be combined. One example might be to publish a print newsletter at the beginning and end of the school year, and use the shorter postcard format for the remaining months. Another option might be to use the newspaper ads and postcards on
an alternating basis, or every other month. The most appropriate model will have to be determined once the costs are known.

The key consideration is ensuring that information of interest and value is delivered effectively on a regular basis to residents without students enrolled in HMC-1.

**Action Step 8.2**

Continue to increase HMC-1’s presence at community meetings and events, and provide more face-to-face communication opportunities with district leaders.

News and information today can be obtained via multiple resources and in a variety of formats, but trust and strong relationships are created through direct connection. In order to build and expand connections with the community at large, seek opportunities to connect with senior citizens, empty nesters and other residents who do not have children in school. Face-to-face connection is the most powerful way to build relationships and one of the most reliable methods for communicating important issues.

The superintendent and other district leaders are currently involved in various civic and community organizations, which has led to strong relationships with local leaders and the sharing of information through regular presentations and conversations. The auditor learned that Dr. Cargile has begun taking a student with her to meetings of the South Kansas City Alliance. Consider expanding this strategy to include groups such as neighborhood homeowner associations, Rotary, senior living facilities, etc.

While it is not always feasible for district administrators or principals to become active members of community organizations, serving as presenters at meetings of those organizations is more achievable. Add any scheduled public presentations by district and school administrators out in the community to the online calendar of “upcoming events.” Consider promoting those appearances in advance via social media and school newsletters to invite attendance and also to build public awareness of the district’s outreach efforts.

By expanding current efforts, the district can continue to build strong community connections and greater support and understanding of how tax dollars are spent for education.
Recommendation 9:
Review and expand the crisis communication plan.

In today’s world, school districts must be prepared to deal with the unexpected – from threats of violence to weather events to major health epidemics. The speed of today’s communication technology adds another layer of challenge. The ability of students and staff to call, text, post or live stream as an incident is taking place can relegate a school district to the role of communication “observer” rather than a valued information provider if it does not have an effective and well-practiced plan for issuing accurate, timely communications to key stakeholders during crisis situations.

Currently, HMC-1 has two district-level documents that deal with how to manage and respond to crisis incidents. One is a Crisis Communication Plan and Guidelines document that lays out basic procedures for the Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP) and for the formation of a district crisis communication team. The second, titled Emergency Response Guidelines, spells out steps for schools to take for specific types of incidents such as fire, earthquakes, attempted abductions, etc.. In addition, each school has a confidential, site-specific, detailed response and action plan. The two district-level plans are stand-alone documents, and in terms of communication planning, are not or are very minimally integrated with each other.

The following action steps provide a guide for reviewing and updating the current plans to develop a more cohesive and comprehensive plan for crisis communications management.

Action Step 9.1

Blend or integrate the existing Crisis Communication Plan and the Emergency Response Guidelines.

The district’s Emergency Response Guidelines document appears to have been developed in isolation from its Crisis Communication Plan document. While it is certainly important to have clear procedures for schools to follow in the event of some natural or man-made crisis, it is equally important to have clear protocols for communication about those events. The overarching goal of such a plan is get the right information to the right people at the right time so that good decisions can be made and so that public trust and confidence is maintained.

The current emergency response guidelines cover a range of possible incidents, and for each one, have directions and responsibilities for staff and for administrators. What the guidelines do not have, however, is a communication component for each. As an example, the potential incident of “missing student” does not mention the possibility of needing to involve the media in efforts to locate the child. Such incidents often involve communications staff issuing a news release, calling a news conference or responding to media inquiries. This type of coordination, between PIOP and administrators in the midst of the crisis, may be occurring in practice but is not currently reflected in planning documents.

Adding to the possible confusion is the fact that the district’s crisis communication plan outlines a procedure for the individual who encounters a potential crisis to notify an appropriate administrator, for the administrator to notify the superintendent and PIOP director, and for the superintendent to determine whether to convene a crisis communication team. But nowhere in the emergency response guidelines is that procedure addressed, and the
guidelines never mention the possible need for a crisis communication team.

If the district’s response to a crisis and its communications to key stakeholders about the crisis are to be seamless, coordinated and appropriate, such inconsistencies in the two main guidance documents need to be ironed out to strengthen coordination between PIOP and the Security Office.

**Action Step 9.2**

**Emphasize preparation and training.**

Being truly prepared for a crisis requires preparation, planning and training. In a crisis situation, one will react as he or she is trained; knowing what to do can be the difference between chaos and calm or even life and death. School staff members face unusual demands and can be overwhelmed by the extent and magnitude of an incident, so many schools are embracing and implementing response plans aligned with the Incident Command System (ICS), a standardized management approach that allows for a coordinated response among school staff acting as emergency response teams and public safety agencies.

As HMC-1 begins to review and revise its plans for crisis response and communications, the district should continue to involve local first responders, including the Kansas City Police Department, Jackson County Sheriff’s Department, fire department and emergency agencies. In the event of a major incident, those agencies will respond to the campuses and take the lead role. It is essential that the district’s revised, integrated plan (see Action Step 9.1) dovetail seamlessly with theirs.

If a crisis plan is a necessity for schools today, putting that plan into practice is an absolute must. After the district’s plan is updated to reflect a coordinated approach to crisis communications, HMC-1 should develop a scenario to test the plan and involve the other agencies mentioned. Schools have stepped-up crisis response training, from table-top scenario discussions to active shooter drills with local law enforcement and fire-safety partners. Crises know no time or structure limits. It is critical, therefore, to teach flexibility with the pre-established procedures for responding to an incident. When confronted with a crisis, the best you can hope to do is stay abreast of the evolving incident and its impacts. Crisis, by its nature, is reactive, and no two crises are alike.

In fall 2018, the Department of Homeland Security released exercise starter kits ([https://www.dhs.gov/exercise-starter-kits-esks](https://www.dhs.gov/exercise-starter-kits-esks)) to help schools with tabletop exercises for staff on safety processes and procedures. There are situation manuals for different grade levels, and each manual contains three modules (initial response, continued response, short-term recovery). These kits make it clear that communication is an important and essential consideration during a crisis response.

Crisis management experts also recommend that school leaders periodically re-evaluate their security measures. School-level plans in HMC-1 are revisited annually, an effort to be applauded. Crisis response plans are dynamic documents and are not meant to gather dust on a shelf or be opened only when an incident occurs.

**#9**

Review and expand the crisis communication plan.
Action Step 9.3
Take advantage of social media capabilities to maintain stakeholder confidence during a crisis.

With the ongoing, growing popularity of social media and digital communications, no school system should rely on any one source for sharing information about an incident. Local media outlets should not be ignored, but they are no longer the only avenues for messaging. Crisis communication plans must account for multiple approaches to disseminating information throughout a crisis.

Social media is a tool to engage parents and stakeholders in conversations. By doing so early (before a crisis), schools establish a community of participants and a familiarity as the go-to source for information about an incident and how schools are responding. In an emergency, people will seek information wherever they can find it. Currently, HMC-1 uses its website, Facebook and Twitter accounts to address weather closures, calendar changes and other incidents. Your patrons will turn to those platforms in a crisis, so ensure that they are used appropriately in crisis situations.

During the crisis, social media provides an opportunity to share information with engaged stakeholders quickly and easily. It also enables two-way communication in today’s world where people crave dialogue. Some best-practice tips for using social media during a crisis include:

- **Designate a staff member to monitor and manage the district’s social media during a crisis**, preferably someone separate from the communications staff member who is directly coordinating with the incident command team/superintendent.

- **Update the content in the original post about the crisis or post updates as responses to the original post** rather than making an entirely new post for each update. Those who have already engaged with the post will be more likely to see the new information, and for those late to the situation, that keeps information linked and in chronological order.

- **Post the most essential messages for stakeholders to know on social media**, and link to extended district statements, Q&As, resources, etc. on the website as appropriate. Be consistent across all platforms, so parents, staff and other stakeholders get the same message no matter where they turn for information.

- **Share what you can, and when you can’t share more, explain why.** During an active situation, parents will of course want to know all of the details, but most will understand why in the midst of a situation you can only confirm generalities, as long as you promise—and deliver on—more information once it is available.

After the crisis, re-engaging on social media platforms may be the best opportunity to lead the way in connecting the community to help in the recovery effort.

Huge dividends are afforded districts that are successful in creating a relationship with an online community of participants. These “key communicators” on social media become online influencers, who have the ability to get to a wide range of audiences in times of a crisis to manage rumors and correct misinformation. But keep in mind that social media also presents challenges for school leaders by placing the ability for instant communication in the hands of anyone – student, parent, staff member. Thus, the bottom line is still less about saying (or tweeting) the right things and more about doing the right things.

The more schools engage in social media from the beginning, the better positioned they will be
to anticipate, communicate and regain trust in order to help manage and reduce the severity of a crisis.

**Action Step 9.4**

Establish a memorandum of understanding with the public information officers from the county’s multiple law enforcement jurisdictions to set forth how information will flow during a crisis in or around a school building.

As HMC-1 works to better integrate its plan for crisis communications, it needs to ensure that its release of information will flow smoothly with the public information efforts of area law enforcement.

The rules governing the release of information by school districts and by police departments are not always the same. Creating and maintaining a collegial, collaborative working relationship with law enforcement as it relates to communication is vital to the release of accurate information to the public. This makes knowing who says what and in what circumstances critical, especially in crisis situations.

In collaboration with HMC-1’s director of security and representative public information officers (PIO) for local law enforcement, PIOP should:

- **List the specific communication responsibilities of the district and of local law enforcement and emergency response agencies during a crisis.** For example, it might be established that law enforcement PIOs should notify a designated district communications staff member as soon as an incident impacts a school building or the area adjacent to the school.

- **Establish parameters around the appropriate and timely release of information during a crisis.** Determine who will serve as primary contact for the police and for the schools so both sides can direct reporters to the correct spokesperson. Law enforcement should not address questions about school policies, and school staff should not speak to issues surrounding police functions, investigations and actions. Discuss who releases information first, when, how and under which circumstances.

- **Formalize the arrangement, and create a crisis communication leadership team composed of key district staff as well as law enforcement and first responders.** HMC-1 has the beginnings of such a group with the “crisis communication team” concept introduced in its Crisis Communication Plan document.
  > This group should oversee planning for the district’s communication response to emergencies in coordination with PIOs from local law enforcement and emergency response agencies.
  > The team might be charged with convening during a crisis, integrating itself into the Incident Command System and overseeing the communication function of the crisis management team.
  > The team should meet periodically to revise and re-familiarize themselves with crisis communication procedures.
Recommendation 10:
Consider the staffing and resource implications of the recommendations in this report.

HMC-1 has a long-standing commitment to communication as an important management function of the district. This is evidenced by the establishment of its Public Information and Partnerships Office (PIOP), which has a history of developing award-winning programs.

The district has wisely invested in a professional communications office staff with skilled personnel, who are tasked with managing internal and external communication across the school system. This team is already functioning at full capacity, so taking on the projects and tasks recommended in this report may seem daunting. The following action steps provide ways in which PIOP staff can evaluate current tasks in order to identify those that might be safely eliminated to accommodate new initiatives suggested in this report.

In addition, the district may want to consider options for contracting out tasks or bringing on student interns for those initiatives that are desirable but not achievable within current communication staffing levels.

Action Step 10.1
Turn a critical eye on communication tasks and ask the hard questions.

Public information and partnerships staff should take a hard look at all office functions and ask how current projects and tasks fit into the district’s five-year strategic plan and PIOP’s new strategic communication plan. Department staff are the best judge of what should stay and what should go, so allow time for some self-reflection and discussion as a team in response to these questions:

- What would happen if a specific program, task or service were eliminated?
- What goal does the program, task or service fall under?
- Does the program or task really belong with PIOP or would it be a better fit for a different department?
- How critical are the ramifications of the program, task or service to strategic plan goals? If something were eliminated, how would the goals be impacted?
- How will the eliminated program, task or service provide more staff time or resources for more effective strategic initiatives?

Every great communication office always has too much to do, so eliminating a task or function should not be threatening. The cuts may even include a “sacred cow” or two that may be upsetting to those who feel some personal ownership. However, now is the time to make room for the most effective strategic measures that support HMC-1’s desire to be seen as a leading school district.
**Action Step 10.2**

| Evaluate and track time on task. |

PIOP is involved in a variety of different projects related to the communication effort at both the district and school level. In order to ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful to record the actual time spent on each task. This would allow the director to evaluate efficiency and determine if there are tasks that take time away from communication priorities that could be shifted to other departments or that could be managed differently.

Create a work-flow plan to track each ongoing task or special project (e.g., e-newsletters, marketing activities, special events, crisis communications, media response, website updates, social media posts, board and policy tasks). This will allow for a quick assessment of the status of the workload and a way to stay on top of deadlines and readjust priorities as necessary. Sharing this information with the Executive Leadership Team members can also build awareness and understanding of the communication function and help set priorities for the year.
In 2011, NSPRA embarked on a major undertaking to create a benchmarking framework for school public relations practice that our members can use to assess their programs. The work was organized into “critical function areas,” and to date, rubrics have been completed for the following five areas:

- Comprehensive Professional Communication Program
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Branding/Marketing Communications
- Crisis Communications

While it is difficult to quantify the value of public relations and there is no agreement on the best tools and methods, in the spirit of traditional benchmarking practice, NSPRA sought to identify top performers in each critical function area based on results and gathered research in each area to develop the rubrics and suggested measures. The complete Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures publication is available in NSPRA’s Online Store at https://www.nspra.org/.

The following reflects the auditor’s assessment of where Hickman Mills C-1 School District’s communication efforts fall when evaluated against the program components for each critical function area. In any given area, an “emerging” communication program is typically responsive to immediate needs or problems with minimal proactive planning; communication efforts are largely reactive. An “established” program includes a series of defined approaches based on at least some research, with strategies, tactics and goals defined. An “exemplary” program is fully based on the four-step strategic planning model, is aligned and integrated into the school system’s strategic plan, and is supported through policy, training and adequate resources.

HMC-1 has an experienced, professional and dedicated team in the Public Information and Partnerships Office, which oversees a multi-layered and multi-channeled communication effort. But when the various components of the district’s overall communication program are considered, it is clear that HMC-1 sits somewhere between emerging and established in terms of offering a comprehensive professional communications program.

Giving more attention to the following program components will help the district move more firmly into the established category and toward becoming an exemplary model for other districts (see Recommendations 1, 2, 7, 9):

- **Manage communication through the four-step strategic planning process.** Effective school communications programs are rooted in research and developed to achieve specific and measurable goals. Strategies and tactics are implemented for specific audiences to achieve specific outcomes. As a strategic communication plan is developed and implemented, the district will take a giant step toward the exemplary level in this area.

- **Keep communication a priority through board policy.** Standardized communication protocols and guidelines for administrators and staff are needed along with better articulation of their communication responsibilities. Policies and practices related to communication also need review and/or revision or development.

- **Embed communication effectiveness across board and building operations.** The challenge is meeting and supporting
the communication needs of the schools. Although many schools and departments throughout HMC-1 appear to fall in or are close to the established category on this rubric, it was clear from focus group discussions that performance is inconsistent. More needs to be done to elevate building-level communication and provide the tools, content and strategic support needed to move into the exemplary category.

- **Provide effective finance communications.** There is little evidence of any proactive development and distribution of budget and finance information to employees or key external stakeholders. The website contains only the elements required by law (approved budgets and annual audits). Building trust and confidence will require a more planned effort. This area is clearly in the emerging level.

- **Effectively engage target audiences through social media.** HMC-1 is moving quickly into the established category with its effective social media efforts. Given its focus on social media, its recent successes in this area and the growing effectiveness of social media as a news and information vehicle, even more strategic uses of these key communication vehicles can be implemented.

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**Internal Communications – Emerging/Established**

In HMC-1, there are efforts to get important information from district departments to schools and from schools to their staffs, but the auditor’s analysis found gaps in the process. The district needs a coordinated plan and systematic process for ensuring internal communications as an integrated component, aligned with the board’s strategic objectives and designed to promote two-way dialogue, collaboration and engagement.

An assessment of current internal communications shows that it appears to be primarily one-way in nature, and consistency of message and delivery is an issue for many in HMC-1. For the most part, it is designed as an information feed; components that could promote active employee engagement and opportunities for dialogue with leaders at various levels aren’t always effectively used. Key to improving internal communication is a focus on standardizing leadership and supervisory communication across the district and in its schools. Research shows that effective internal communication leads to positive relationships with employees and increased job satisfaction, morale, trust and productivity.

When compared against NSPRA’s benchmarking rubrics for internal communications, HMC-1 is functioning in the emerging and established categories in a number of the rubric areas. The district should continue to expand and improve internal communication efforts that support the movement toward exemplary practices. Giving more attention to the following program components will help the district do so (see Recommendations 2, 5):
• **Research and understand employee needs, expectations, opinions, attitudes and knowledge.** Internal focus group participants feel opportunities exist for employees to provide input to district leaders, but such opportunities are inconsistent. Many also reported rarely hearing back on results or how their input or feedback was used. In order to create strong staff ambassadors, they need to feel they have voice, that their experience is valued and that their role in the enterprise is important to leadership.

• **Support leadership and management communications.** Currently, it is not clear to all members of the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) what is expected of them about communicating with employees. While there is a very useful tool called Leadership Link sent via email, there is a need for a better understanding of who is to communicate what and to whom following ELT meetings and principal meetings.

• **Create employee ambassadors.** Not all leaders and employees currently fully appreciate the many ways in which all employees can represent the school system – for good or bad. In order to help all employees fulfill their roles as “ambassadors,” a more structured effort is needed that will require the collaboration of all schools and departments in HMC-1.

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**Parent/Family Communications – Emerging/Established**

HMC-1’s parent and family communications are not yet fully in the established category. This is particularly evident in areas of communication inconsistency from school to school as well as messaging on overarching board priorities. It also is evident in the need for standardizing use of communication technologies and protocols, in particular the use of apps and websites.

A proactive parent and family communication program directly supports student success in school and keeps parents informed about and involved in their children’s education by building collaboration and trust. The auditor applauds HMC-1’s effort at recognizing the critical role principals and teachers must play in these two-way communication efforts, and encourages the district to strive to develop more consistent direction, training and support for school-based efforts to connect parents as partners in their children’s education.

To be more fully established in this critical function area, the following program components should be a focus (see Recommendation 3):

• **Communicate with parents/families on student progress/success.** More than anything else, parents and guardians want to know how their child is doing in academics and how they can help. One of the hallmarks of established programs is an online portal with grades, attendance and homework. HMC-1 uses Infinite Campus, but such programs are not useful if teachers do not maintain them and keep them current. Currently, not all schools’ parent involvement plans mention Infinite Campus as a source of information. Clear expectations and protocols for school-
level communications and consistent enforcement of them will move this indicator forward. Likewise, a review of how (and when) the district expects teachers to communicate with parents via phone and email would help move the needle to the established level.

- **Communicate school and board goals, plans, programs, finances and issues with parents/families.** With many in HMC-1's communities seeing the school system primarily through the lens of their neighborhood schools, the district should make improvements in this area a priority. This will not only improve message consistency, but also help build engaged parent advocates when they understand the vision and direction for the district and how it supports their local school and family. It also will help to build a beneficial, long-term appreciation for the district’s programming and strengths among families, so they remain positive as their children move through the system.

- **Communicate student conduct expectations and discipline policies with parents/families.** HMC-1 has made a sincere effort to communicate its expectations and policies surrounding discipline, bullying and harassment at both the district and school level. Nonetheless, parents and community members were unclear about why certain discipline matters were handled the way they were. To move this element into the exemplary level, a more comprehensive effort should be undertaken to help parents understand expectations.

### Marketing/Branding – Emerging

To quote from NSPRA’s *Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures*, “Increased competition, declining resources, changing demographics, news media scrutiny and the importance of public perceptions are just a few reasons schools and school districts need an effective marketing program. Having a well-defined and authentically experienced brand promise as part of the marketing strategy helps position the school district in the community’s mind and supports the district’s vision.” As detailed in this report, those are exactly the challenges facing HMC-1.

When current practices are compared with best-practice standards for the following program components, HMC-1 is solidly in the emerging category (see [Recommendation 4](#)):

- **Conduct market communications research.** Communication research for planning and monitoring is an ongoing responsibility in communication program efforts, and PIOP is encouraged to also incorporate marketing-communication research and assessments where appropriate to support marketing programming and to extend its communication effectiveness.

- **Develop the district’s brand position, attributes, “Points of Pride,” promise and traditions.** In many ways, HMC-1 and its leadership are firmly established in this area with their focus on celebrating success and finding ways to use tradition to support change and progress. By enhancing its communication programming with a strategic focus on these issues, it could quickly become exemplary. Many of the current efforts to share good news and trumpet successes are scattered. Bringing them together in a comprehensive, strategic effort will pay dividends.
• **Foster brand ownership and brand loyalty among staff and district leaders as ambassadors.** With an increased focus on developing staff as ambassadors for HMC-1 as part of their job performance, it will be important to ensure all employees are familiar with the board’s brand promise and how they can reinforce it in their daily communication and decision-making.

• **Effectively engage target audiences through electronic tools in a crisis.** Keeping databases of parents’ email, phone and text contact information up to date is a challenge for all school districts, especially those with a large population of low-income and transient families. HMC-1 participants in the principals and teachers focus groups expressed frustration in effectively communicating with parents, citing ever-changing phone numbers and email addresses resulting in a high percentage of “bounce-backs” and undelivered messages. The lack of accurate contact information has the potential to severely compromise effective communications with families during a crisis.

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**Crisis Communications – Emerging**

HMC-1’s emergency response guidelines lack integration with its crisis communication plan, and there is little evidence of coordination and training for staff in the area of communications during all phases of a crisis. As such, the district’s crisis communications program falls into the emerging category in this critical function area.

A well-planned and practiced crisis communication and management plan, developed in conjunction with local first responders, will allow district leaders to manage strategy, key messages, timing and a variety of communication channels to facilitate effective communication with staff, families, students, news media and community stakeholders.

Following are components of an effective crisis communications program that would benefit from additional focus in HMC-1 (see Recommendations 3, 9):

• **Maximize communication effectiveness with trained staff and leadership.** Once an integrated plan for crisis communications is developed, moving to exemplary in this area will require systematic training and, at least annually, a practice scenario to test the plan’s effectiveness.
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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you perceive as Hickman Mills’ greatest strengths? What are the areas needing improvement?

2. From your perspective, what is the greatest communication challenge facing the district?

3. What is the current image of your school district in the community? How would you describe the district and schools to someone new to your community?

4. How do you get important news and information about issues affecting students, schools and the district?
   - Are Board Brief [internal groups only] and the C-1 School Messenger newsletter helpful and informative? How can they be improved?
   - Do the district/school websites provide the information you want and need? Are they easy to navigate? How can they be improved?
   - Do the district’s social media channels provide the information you want and need? How can they be improved?

5. What does the district do well when it comes to communicating with you? In what ways can it improve to better meet your preferences or needs?
   - Is information delivered in a timely manner?
   - How often should the district send information to you?
   - What additional information would you like to receive?

6. What does the district do well when it comes to communicating on important issues that affect schools such as educating funding, legislation and curriculum or operational changes? How might the district improve on that? Are there any areas where you would like to get more information?
   - With a show of hands, how many of you are aware of a planned bond issue election in August? How can the district best keep you informed on that vital matter? What strategies and tactics should they employ?

7. [For Administrators/Teachers/Support Staff] How do district communications affect your ability to be successful in your job? Are there any areas where you need more communications support?

8. [For Administrators/Teachers/Support Staff] What do you see as your role in communicating with families, staff and the wider community? Is that role clearly defined so that you understand your responsibilities?

9. When district leaders make important decisions that will affect you, do you feel that they truly listen to your input when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made? What makes you feel that way? If not, how would you like to provide your input?
What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools worldwide. NSPRA’s mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission by developing and providing a variety of diverse products, services and professional development activities to our members as well as to other education leaders interested in improving their communication efforts.

With over 80 years of experience, NSPRA is known for providing proven, practical approaches to solving school district and education agency communication problems. We offer useful communication products and workshops as well as an annual national Seminar, maintain best practice resource files and conduct communication accountability research. We also sponsor national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides school public relations/communications counsel and assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies and state and national associations. For many of these organizations, we have completed comprehensive communication audits to analyze the effectiveness of their overall communication programs and to recommend strategies for improving and enhancing their efforts.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication conference in North America, is held each July. This four-day conference offers expert speakers on more than 70 topics in the areas of school communication, PR, marketing and engagement.

NSPRA members can continue their professional development year round through a variety of electronic and print publications:

• The NSPRA Network e-newsletter tackles major education communication issues and offers proven strategies to address them.

• Our e-updates, NSPRA This Week, The NSPRA Counselor and NSPRA Alert, offer summaries of breaking national education news, in-depth studies of issues and trends, and updates on Seminars, products and services available.

• PRincipal Communicator is a monthly building-level print newsletter that provides practical communication tips for school principals to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.

• Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents is an e-newsletter targeting issues and topics related to communication for school leaders.

At www.nspra.org, NSPRA offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public website and more in-depth information, resources and archives in a Members Only section. The members-only benefit NSPRA Connect is an online community forum that allows members to connect with and learn from one another while sharing ideas, uploading resources and providing counsel through a robust discussion forum. NSPRA has 33 chapters across the United States that provide local professional development and networking opportunities for members. We maintain collaborative working relationships with other national education associations along with a network of contacts and resources among corporate communication professionals and their companies.
Auditor’s Vita

Steve Mulvenon, Ph.D.
Consultant auditor

Dr. Steve Mulvenon had a 42-year career in public education as a high school teacher, debate coach and administrator, including 24 years as the director of communications and community outreach for the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada. In that leadership position, he successfully oversaw the passage of four bond issues; started the district’s school-business partnership program; launched the first district website; began a comprehensive community engagement process (for which the district received NSPRA’s highest award, the Gold Medallion) and a parent involvement program; and oversaw the move into a coordinated social media program. He also served as the district’s principal media spokesman.

Before moving to Nevada, Dr. Mulvenon held a similar position with the Salina (Kansas) Public Schools, serving as its first director of public information. He served two years as the president of the Kansas School Public Relations Association (KanSPRA). While in Kansas, he also served for two years as the director of admissions for Marymount College.

He has been a presenter at various national conferences, including the NSPRA National Seminar, the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association annual conferences. He has authored a number of articles for NSPRA’s online publications on topics such as marketing, test security, parental involvement, copyright infringement and media relations.

In 2009, Dr. Mulvenon was honored by the Sierra Nevada Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) with induction into its Hall of Fame.

Dr. Mulvenon has taught graduate-level classes in school/community relations for both the University of Nevada’s College of Education and the Reno campus of the University of Phoenix. He is active in the Reno community and has served on the Community Advisory Board for Reno’s PBS station (KNPB) and is the past-president of the Board of Directors for the Northern Nevada International Center.