NSPRA's Communication Audit Report

for

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

March 2017

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Prepared for the

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

Hamilton, Ontario

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Contents

Introduction

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) provides public education at 103 school sites and offers an impressive variety of instructional opportunities for its students. Under the leadership of Director Manny Figueiredo, the Board and Trustees recently completed a comprehensive strategic planning process that engaged internal and external stakeholders in extensive consultation to create goals for the Board. *HWDSB Reimagined* includes effective communication as one of five major priorities.

HWDSB leaders are committed to effective communication throughout the Board and with the community, and are particularly focused on improving internal communication. This communication audit was contracted for, approved, and supported by the Trustees and administration. It demonstrates the willingness of HWDSB leaders to address communication challenges and continue to strengthen and create educational opportunities for all students.

The goal of this communication audit was two-fold – to seek data, opinion, and perceptions, and from these to assess the effectiveness and management of communication, public relations, marketing, and engagement throughout the Board; and to provide recommendations on strategies that will allow the school board to continue to improve its overall communication program while strengthening the relationship between HWDSB and its internal and external audiences.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the Corporate Communications department or any other department or individual school, they are intended to build effective communication in a school board that is committed to continuous improvement, maintaining quality and excellence, and serving the needs of all of its students and constituents to the best of its ability.

Although it is difficult to measure communication overall, individual elements can be assessed. It can also be determined whether strategies, systems and processes are in place for everyone to communicate effectively. 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 the recommendations, the auditors reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of HWDSB's mission, goals and objectives.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit of HWDSB provides an important foundation for developing, implementing and evaluating a strategic communication plan for the Board. The audit provides information about attitudes, perceptions, and the effectiveness of current communication, engagement and marketing/branding efforts and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the overall communication program. The audit also provides a benchmark for continuing to measure progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of focus groups and interview sessions representing a variety of HWDSB's internal and external publics. Participants in the focus groups were invited by district officials to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas. The focus group sessions were approximately one hour in length and were held November 7-8, 2016, with the following groups:

- Parents/School Council Representatives
- Parents
- Community Partners
- Board Advisory Committee Representatives
- Elementary Teachers
- Secondary Teachers
- Paraprofessionals
- School Support Staff
- School Office Staff
- Education Centre Staff
- Student Leaders
- Elementary Principals
- Secondary Principals
- Department Managers
- Executive Council
- Board of Trustees

Processes and procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school board to view its communication from an "outside" perspective. The NSPRA consultants for this communication audit were Susan Hardy Brooks, APR, vice president at Schnake Turnbo Frank, and Sylvia Link, APR, ABC, director of marketing and communications at Retired Teachers of Ontario/Les enseignantes et enseignants retraités de l'Ontario. Their vitae are included in the Appendix of this report.

The first step in the NSPRA Communication Audit process involved Corporate Communications submitting samples of materials used to communicate with various audiences (i.e., online resources, publications, marketing materials, reports, program information, etc.). The auditors also reviewed the

Board and school websites and social media sites. Supplemental surveys of principals were also completed.

These materials and websites were all examined for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. In addition, the auditors reviewed news clippings, demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, etc.

The core of the audit is the onsite focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the Board's internal and external audiences. In our audit of HWDSB, the auditors met with 16 focus groups and the Corporate Communications department staff. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions.

This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of HWDSB's current communications program.

- Elicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns, and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of Board communication.

- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences, including internal audiences, and to improve the management of public relations, communication, marketing, and engagement activities for HWDSB.

Following the review of materials and focus group input, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The final report was carefully reviewed by NSPRA Executive Director Richard D. Bagin, APR, and Associate Director Karen H. Kleinz, APR. The recommendations focus on strategies HWDSB can use to communicate more strategically and effectively, both internally and externally. The recommendations should serve as a guide to help organize and prioritize key communication resources and activities to effectively deliver key messages designed to build strong community support for student achievement and success, and improve and enhance overall communication practices.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, education organizations, and agencies throughout North America to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, communication and engagement 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 which earn public understanding and support.

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 system and its work through the perspective of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable in 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. Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist HWDSB leaders in their efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively. That being said, this report is not meant to diminish the many positive activities and accomplishments of HWDSB and the Corporate Communications department.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this *Communication Audit Report* contains recommendations for improving two-way communication with HWDSB's internal and external stakeholders and becoming more strategic and effective with outreach and messaging efforts. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems around North America.

Copies to participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in 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.

Executive Summary

Although many focus group participants feel optimistic about Manny Figueiredo's leadership as HWDSB Director, the overall tone of the internal focus group sessions was one of frustration over a lack of communication, consistency and collaboration across the Board. Since the transition to new leadership is relatively recent, the timing is right for implementing new strategic priorities, including improved communication. Our research confirms that communication is a critical need throughout the Board. The tone of the external focus group sessions was more positive, and reflected a hopefulness in HWDSB's increased transparency and the development of stronger community partnerships.

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* and it would be unrealistic to expect HWDSB and the Corporate Communications staff to undertake all of them immediately given current staffing levels and resources. Changing an organizational culture and getting effective communication systems and processes in place takes time. We have listed the recommendations in priority-order. However, it will be up to the HWDSB administration and Trustees to rank the recommendations based on the resources (financial and human) in place and/or needed to implement them effectively. The recommendations can be used as a basis for the development of a strategic communication plan that includes realistic timelines for implementation over a period of up to three years. It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem unmanageable or overwhelming.

An immediate task is developing a communication plan to introduce and integrate the new strategic priorities of HWDSB.

With a change in leadership there is often a change in the role and function of the communications department. Our recommendations are based on best practices across North America and not on individuals currently in positions in the Corporate Communications department. The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping HWDSB to not only improve, expand and enhance current efforts, but to continue incorporating new components that will allow it to take the communication program to a premier level that serves all its stakeholders. It is also important to recognize that in order to focus on a proactive versus reactive communication effort, consideration must be given to developing strategy, along with the time and staffing that is needed to elevate the program.

HWDSB has a Corporate Communications team that does a commendable job managing a complex program that must continually balance rapid response needs in crisis or breaking news situations with substantive, informational and timely ongoing communication with multiple audiences. The department is currently perceived as being overly focused on reactionary communication. In order to support them in their efforts to successfully develop a more proactive, comprehensive communication plan that supports the Board Goals and Strategic Plan, it is important that consideration be given annually to the budgetary and personnel resources that will be needed, not only to sustain the current communication effort but to allow it to evolve as HWDSB's community and communication needs grow and change.

As we have noted throughout this report, the recommendations presented are not intended for the Corporate Communications department alone. While Corporate Communications certainly has primary responsibility for critical communication tasks, all HWDSB departments and schools must be accountable for improving communication and take the lead in some of the areas addressed in the report. We encourage Board leaders to review the recommendations in this light.

Strategic communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. It is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools.

HWDSB has the leadership and commitment to successfully move its communication program to the next level as it strives to meet the needs of its growing and diverse educational community. The Recommendations with accompanying Action Steps are summarized as follows:

■ **Recommendation 1: Develop a research-based strategic communication plan.**

Action Step – Develop a proactive media plan.

Action Step – Assess crisis communication planning components.

■ **Recommendation 2: Promote a "Culture of Communication."**

Action Step – Use a Communication Responsibility Grid.

Action Step – Improve message consistency and frame issues for clarity and transparency.

Action Step – Develop and share key messages and talking points on important topics and critical issues.

Action Step – Establish communication expectations and protocols for Board leaders, superintendents and principals, and support and evaluate their efforts.

Action Step – Add a "how this [issue/decision/information, etc.] will be communicated" section to agendas for the Executive Council, superintendents, principals and Trustees.

■ **Recommendation 3: Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.**

Action Step – Incorporate status updates on projects and initiatives as regular items on Board of Trustees meeting agendas.

Action Step – Create internal "toolkits" for introducing new policies, programs or initiatives.

■ **Recommendation 4: Restructure the roles and responsibilities of the Corporate Communications team to align work with Board goals and priorities**.

Action Step – Focus on HWDSB's strategic priorities and proactive response, prioritize internal over external communication, and develop clear systems and processes for communication efforts.

Action Step – Create a senior-level position for communications that assures communication research, planning, implementation and evaluation is a proactive and critical consideration in all leadership decisions.

Action Step – Develop and communicate a process and procedures for internal staff on accessing and using Corporate Communications department services.

Action Step – Transition from acting as a fulfillment department for internal requests to one that proactively shapes the strategic communication priorities of the Board and equips employees to be effective communicators and ambassadors for HWDSB.

Action Step – Turn a critical eye on communication tasks and ask questions.

Action Step – Evaluate and track time on task.

■ **Recommendation 5: Improve internal communication systems and processes.**

Action Step – Make frontline, school-based communication support a top priority.

Action Step – "Close the loop" on communication.

Action Step – Develop an e-news update for HWDSB employees.

Action Step – Revamp and rethink the *Friday Memo*.

Action Step – Use employee orientation sessions to remind staff of their communication role.

Action Step – Include school and department frontline staff in the communication loop.

Action Step – Provide communication training and add effective communication to the evaluation process for principals and administrators.

■ **Recommendation 6: Transform the culture of HWDSB to build trust, engagement and pride in the Board.**

Action Step – Undertake a formal employee engagement program.

Action Step – Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.

Action Step – Create opportunities for open, transparent two-way communication with Board leaders to promote trust and relationship building.

Action Step – Provide employees with opportunities to play an active role in decision-making.

Action Step – Celebrate staff contributions and successes.

■ **Recommendation 7: Expand communication through a multi-channel effort.**

Action Step – Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.

Action Step – Balance print and electronic publications to maximize impact.

Action Step – Expand the use of video as a communication vehicle to tell the HWDSB story.

Action Step – Be more purposeful about using partnerships, committees and other groups as key communicators.

Action Step – Treat students as an internal audience and as a communication conduit to families and the community.

Action Step – Provide regular progress reports on *HWDSB Reimagined.*

■ **Recommendation 8: Develop and implement an integrated digital engagement strategy.**

Action Step – Create formal, multi-disciplinary governance for all internal and external web-based projects.

Action Step – Develop a promotional plan for HWDSB website, school websites and social media.

Action Step – Enhance HWDSB social media presence to engage and interact with audiences.

Action Step – Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality, and multimedia to engage users.

Action Step – Investigate the possibility of implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) system to support digital communication and relationship building.

■ **Recommendation 9: Continue to improve and leverage the HWDSB website as a communications hub.**

Action Step – Keep school websites up-to-date to build their effectiveness as a communication resource.

Action Step – Improve website usability through robust, user-intuitive search functionality.

Action Step – Conduct research and user testing to determine future enhancements to the Board and school websites.

Action Step – Enhance the Staff Website as an internal communication hub.

■ **Recommendation 10: Strategically increase the visibility and accessibility of Board leaders in the community and schools.**

Action Step – Raise the awareness and profile of *HWDSB Reimagined*.

Action Step – Develop a deliberate strategy for the Executive Council to visit schools throughout the year with a specific focus.

Action Step – Consider producing regular video messages from the Director of Education.

Action Step – Encourage HWDSB leaders to actively participate in local civic and service organizations.

Key Findings

The auditors identified several common themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. In addition, the entire review of current materials and the assessment of what needs to be done to improve the communication effort led to the following key findings and observations:

General Perceptions of Key External and Internal Focus Groups

- Focus group participants view HWDSB staff and schools as caring and focused on student well-being and student achievement. Community partners appreciate improved recent collaborations and believe that HWDSB is moving in a positive direction by increasing transparency and community partnerships. Participants also believe a strength of HWDSB is the Board's ability to communicate effectively in emergency situations.

- The HWDSB website is seen as an important communication hub. Audiences appreciate the subscription feature. The Board's Twitter presence and the way in which schools and teachers use Twitter as a communication and instructional tool is an effective way to communicate with parents, the community and staff. Parents also appreciate Synervoice and the ability to subscribe for updates.

- Parents and employees believe there are an overwhelming number of technology platforms. Internal and parent focus groups expressed frustration with the number of online platforms they must log into each day. There is a need to streamline, simplify and align communication and information technology platforms across the school system and at the school level.

- Focus group feedback indicated that HWDSB's current image is not as favorable as it could be. While several external groups acknowledged an increase in community partnerships and transparency, internal groups remain skeptical about the Board's reputation and the administration's ability to improve it. Participants felt positive about Director Figueiredo's leadership, yet we heard many comments from internal and external stakeholders' that the Catholic school board is the preferred board and that HWDSB is "bleeding students to the Catholic board." There is the perception that Catholic schools have higher student achievement standards, better facilities and a better reputation.

- Parent focus group participants said their experience with HWDSB varies dramatically from one school to another, which presents major challenges for the Board. The most significant factor in determining whether the parents will have a positive experience is the principal's leadership in the school. The variation from one school to another creates an inconsistent "brand experience" for parents and students when they are considering choices of schools and boards.

- Based on focus group feedback, we found there are still vestiges within the culture of the two former boards – Hamilton and Wentworth – "the haves and have-nots"; and there remains a need to continue efforts to bring them together into one cohesive organization. Many internal groups also spoke about the need to create a collaborative environment in which staff can work effectively across silos – there

is a hunger among staff to collaborate, but the structures to facilitate innovation and transformation need to be strengthened and communicated.

- Participants in most focus groups tend to go to each other to find out information about what is going on in HWDSB. This is a symptom of a board culture in which there is an information vacuum and employees are filling it through the "grapevine." Without specific "go-to" communication channels within the Board and ongoing opportunities for two-way dialogue, rumors and distrust will continue to thrive.

- Many internal and external audiences spoke about the issue of feedback/input. For internal stakeholders, there is cynicism about whether their input will be acted upon. Parent groups expressed much the same view. When HWDSB asks for input, it's essential to "close the communication loop" by letting stakeholders know their input was received and what action was taken as a result. Parents also feel that they generally have input opportunities only on issues of little consequence to their children's education. Finding out what truly matters to internal and external stakeholders and providing opportunities for input will create relationships of trust, especially when action is taken on some of those key issues.

- School-level leaders, particularly principals, are under a lot of stress. By virtue of their roles, administrators have a critical communication role in the school system. They are the gatekeepers for information at the school level and are overwhelmed with the amount of information they are expected to pass on in a timely manner. Several principals in the focus groups said they get requests from the Board that are impossible to fulfill in a timely manner, and sometimes requests are received *after* deadlines have already passed. The *Friday Memo* is challenging because of the scope of information and the time of delivery on Friday afternoons. The problem then cascades to teachers and assistants on the frontlines who feel like they are often the last to know about what's going on.

- In the internal focus groups, inconsistency of messaging was apparent. Some teachers and frontline staff in schools felt informed about district issues, programs, or operations while others said they didn't know key information. There was a gap between the consistent messaging of some building principals and the lack of follow-through by others. There was general consensus across the internal focus groups that HWDSB needs to improve message consistency, dialogue and delivery at all staff levels. Information is not being shared equally or consistently with all schools, departments, and employee groups.

- Focus group participants who work in the schools felt that HWDSB administrators are not aware of how the schools operate and are not particularly responsive to their needs. At the moment, there is a perception among frontline staff that there is "more attention directed to the tag line than the frontline." For example, information or action is often requested of teachers and principals with unrealistic deadlines. There is a perception that some Board staff have never actually been to a school. In addition to the Director's visits to schools, Board leaders need to visit the schools on a regular basis to interact with principals, teachers and students. Parents, along with teachers and

school-level staff, want to see administrators in their schools, at events and participating with them in face-to-face discussions about the issues that matter most to their children's education.

Some Future Communication Challenges

As part of the focus group process, participants were asked what they felt were the communication challenges facing HWDSB in the near future. Their responses touched on the following:

- Constantly changing technology and the Board's use of too many platforms.

- Identifying ways to provide communication consistency across all channels.

- The shift in demographics.

- Diversity of students will continue to be a challenge.

- Newcomers, including 1,000 Syrian refugees and language learners.

- Preparing teachers in cultural competency and diversity.

Recommendations

HWDSB has the opportunity to advance its reputation and improve outcomes for students through the implementation of *HWDSB Reimagined.* Board leaders have made a significant commitment to improving communication by making it one of the Board's top priorities. The research and recommendations provided here provide a foundation for acting on these commitments. Every employee at HWDSB is responsible for effective communication. It is the responsibility of the Corporate Communications team to develop strategic, two-way communications that will lead to better understanding, stronger relationships with key audiences, and increased community support for HWDSB.

Recommendation – 1

Develop a research-based strategic communication plan.

HWDSB needs to develop a strategic communication plan that supports the goals identified in *HWDSB Reimagined*. Corporate Communications is presently functioning more as a fulfillment department than one that provides strategy and counsel, and develops tactics and tools to support identified communication strategies. A strategic communication plan should serve as the framework for determining communication priorities and driving the work of the team. The plan should demonstrate how projects, tasks, and responsibilities align with the Board Goals and provide clear direction for prioritizing the work of the team.

Charting a clear course for current and future communication needs, as well as being responsive to the direction of the Board, will ensure that HWDSB leadership is communicating the right message to the right constituency using the right communication tactics. The strategic communication plan also should guide the development and dissemination of key messages critical to HWDSB's mission and goals. One significant finding of this communication audit was that improved internal communication is needed, which reinforces the Board's identification of internal communication as a strategic priority.

A comprehensive communication plan provides transparency and accountability for plan implementation. It is a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability across the system through established evaluative criteria. This plan should guide Corporate Communications and the Board's communication activities. It is important to remember that the school system exists in an ever-changing environment, impacted by many influences. Creating a flexible and dynamic plan that allows for the impact of these influences will benefit HWDSB and the families that it serves.

The strategic communication plan should identify communication goals, objectives and strategies tied to the Board Goals. It should also include identified timelines, target audiences, responsible parties, desired outcomes, cost estimates and evaluation measurements.

By identifying priority areas that need more support from Corporate Communications, there may be a need to move away from some projects or activities that are good practice but not a high priority. A strategic communication plan can provide a measure of the value of all projects, programs and activities

under Corporate Communications' purview and paint a more vivid picture of the department's essential role while building understanding of the value of effective communication across the school system.

The strategic communication plan should take into account all significant stakeholder groups (i.e., staff at all levels of the organization – including part-time and casual staff – parents, students, business, civic and faith community leaders, community members, media, etc.), the information they need and want to know, and the communication vehicles that are best suited to reach each group. A well-defined plan keeps the program on track and ensures that major goals and objectives are not overlooked in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm a system the size of HWDSB.

Pay special attention to incorporating the following elements into the overall plan:

■ **Develop an overall communication goal**, which describes the desired outcome of the communication effort.

■ **Include "SMART" objectives.** The strategic communication plan must include SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Ambitious but attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) objectives for each goal. This will allow HWDSB to determine whether a communication activity is successful, needs additional resources or should be eliminated. An example of a SMART objective: *By [date], 80% of staff are familiar with the five priorities of the Board strategic plan.*

If the objective states only to "create awareness about the strategic plan," it cannot be effectively measured. Measurable objectives will increase the accountability of communication efforts. Results-oriented, or outcome-based objectives, will enable HWDSB to demonstrate the return on investment of resources (funds and staff time) spent on communications.

■ For main audiences, **define each audience's demographic and psychographic characteristics, their attitudes, concerns and communication preferences.** You can draw from this communication audit, as well as other existing audience research, such as climate surveys. This information will help determine communication strategies and tactics.

■ **Develop key messages based on communication objectives and audiences.** Key messages should be "sticky" – memorable and relevant to the audience. Aim for a maximum of three key messages. One or two overall messages may be key, as well as audience-specific.

■ Focus **communication strategies and tactics** on outreach, engagement and dialogue more than simply on broadcasting information.

■ **Evaluate outcomes as well as outputs.** After completing any major communication project or initiative, evaluate its success in terms of outcomes, as well as outputs. For example, printing and distributing kindergarten registration materials is an output. An increase in kindergarten registrants due to increased marketing and communication is an outcome.

Evaluation should also determine which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which could be improved in the future. This step is often overlooked, yet it is critical in demonstrating the impact of strategic communication in helping HWDSB achieve the goals outlined in the strategic plan.

In addition to the overall communication plan, which supports the strategic plan, each annual operating plan must have a communication plan that includes the following:

- Informs staff, students, parents and the community about the main activities/initiatives HWDSB is undertaking in the academic year to achieve its goals;

- Demonstrates the connection between each activity/initiative and the strategic plan;

- Helps employees understand how their work contributes to achieving HWDSB's goals;

- Helps parents and the community understand the actions they can take to support HWDSB;

- Addresses diversity, equity and inclusion as components of the plan; and

- Reports on HWDSB's progress to date in achieving its goals.

Action Step

Develop a proactive media relations plan.

For parents, local media are an important source of information. For community residents without children in school, the local media is no doubt much more influential, especially since the Board currently does a limited amount of community engagement and outreach. A proactive media relations plan is essential to help fill the gap in keeping stakeholders informed about the schools. In addition to responding to media requests, a proactive media relations plan will help HWDSB to:

- Create awareness of HWDSB programs and services, especially among community members who do not have children in schools and who have not regular, direct contact with the school system;

- Build the Board's brand and reputation;

- Emphasize key messages;

- Increase transparency about the school system's operations and decisions; and

- Provide accountability to the public about the Board's progress in achieving strategic plan goals.

Focus news releases on illustrating the Board's goals and key messages through the activities of schools and accomplishments of students and staff. Plan to "pitch" key news stories beyond just local media.

Given the realities of shrinking news resources in media outlets, it is essential to provide reporters with ready-made materials they can easily use – such as b-roll video, photos, quotes, and graphics. We recommend using a social media news release format. Make this material available through a well-resourced newsroom on the HWDSB website (see Recommendation 9). Each news story should link back to one of the goals and directions of the strategic plan, if possible.

Develop the HWDSB website newsroom as a trusted, direct news source for parents and the community. HWDSB should seek to be its own news disseminator. The aim should be to "break" stories in the website newsroom before they are published in the traditional media, so that parents and the community come to rely on the Board as their main direct source of news. The ability for the community to *subscribe* to news releases and "breaking news" is essential.

Consider a "mommy blogger" strategy. These bloggers have large followings and enjoy the trust and confidence of their readers. Connect regularly with local bloggers and research well-known mommy bloggers when you have a story with an unusual or local angle. Consider holding one or two events each year to give these bloggers unique access to preferred content – perhaps a meeting with the Director of Education and other leaders or a tour of a new program before others have this opportunity. Connect with these bloggers to determine which opportunities will be of interest.

Action Step

Assess crisis communication planning components.

The strategic communication plan should also contain a crisis communication protocol and issues management plan. Corporate Communications generally responds effectively in crisis situations. However, a crisis protocol and systemic issues management are essential components of a strategic communications department.

In a crisis situation, HWDSB must be able to reach all key stakeholders within a 30-minute timeframe with critical information. As the Board looks to the future of its communication program and the infrastructure needed to support it, consider the following checklist:

- ✓ Do employees, parents, reporters, and community members turn to the HWDSB website and social media sites first for current news and information about the Board and the schools?

- ✓ Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive Board news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts and other communications?

- ✓ When news breaks, can you get information posted on the Board website and social media sites within minutes?

✓ Does HWDSB have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes? Are back-up systems in place in the event of power outage or other eventualities?

✓ Is there a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, political, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and non-profit organizations?

✓ Does the technology management system provide reports that show what groups and individuals the Board has contacted through email and whether they accessed the information provided?

In addition to the infrastructure for getting information out to audiences in a crisis, the protocol should be to document the process and have action steps in place in the event the Manager of Corporate Communications and those who normally deal with crisis communications are unavailable, so that the Board can still communicate effectively.

Elements of the **crisis communication protocol** should include the following:

■ Scenarios of possible crisis situations, based on incidents that have occurred previously in HWDSB and in other school boards, especially difficult situations such as the suicide or homicide of a student or staff member, a health pandemic, power outage, accident involving students, gun-related violence, etc.;

■ Templates, scripts and samples (i.e., staff meeting scripts, student announcements, parent letters, etc.);

■ Standard tips from crisis response experts and grief counsellors for school staff and parents to help them deal with students' reactions during traumatic situation;

■ Explicit, step-by-step protocols and guidelines to follow; and

■ "Dark" website pages – hidden template website pages ready to update and activate as needed.

Enhance the service provided by Corporate Communications to schools and departments through communication training of staff, ready-to-use and template communication material, and effective use of technology. Make annual crisis communication training for senior leaders and school administrators part of the plan.

At the same time, develop an issues management process – a systematic approach to detecting communication issues before they become a crisis and begin planning the communication approach. Research shows that two-thirds of crises begin as smouldering internal issues.

Elements of the **issues management program** might include the following:

■ An issues management committee – with representatives from across the Board to provide an early alert to Corporate Communications staff about emerging issues in schools and departments.

■ Issues note – develop an issues note format to share issues with the Executive Council, senior administration, Trustees and others. Include background on the issue, key messages, spokesperson, Board positioning and other relevant information.

■ Issues outside the Board – when a critical issue happens in other school boards, in the community and in other organizations, proactively consider how such an issue would be handled in HWDSB and add the situation to the crisis protocols and templates.

■ Set up Google alerts to monitor mentions of HWDSB on social media channels. This serves as an early warning system to identify emerging issues in the community.

NSPRA offers a resource that is helpful in developing a crisis communication manual – *The Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual for Schools – 4th Edition*, updated this year. It is available as a CD through the online product catalog at www.nspra.org.

Recommendation – 2

Promote a "Culture of Communication."

A significant finding from the employee focus groups is the need to improve the internal communication infrastructure to ensure timely and consistent information delivery across the Board. As HWDSB strengthens its communication efforts, it will be important to promote and reinforce a "culture of communication" so that all staff recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. Currently there does not appear to be a clear process for internal communications, so that instead of important information cascading throughout HWDSB, bottlenecks are created when administrators don't know when, how, and what to communicate and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered. The biggest stress and bottleneck is at the school level, where principals are responsible for distributing and responding to information included in the *Friday Memo*. The following action steps can further the goal of improving internal communication and message consistency.

Action Step

Use a Communication Responsibility Grid.

One way to address inconsistencies and assist communication follow-through with meetings is to consider using a responsibility management grid for each meeting where decisions are made or responsibilities set. It helps with closing the communication and responsibility loop. You can easily handle the ambiguity of

"who does what" for each resolved agenda by creating a grid that carries the agenda item, the action taken, the name of the responsible party for next steps, and the deadline established. The grid can be an e-template that can be sent to all administrators and their assistants so everyone is on the same page. This type of grid can also be used with any departments and committees to ensure information is disseminated. Rotate the responsibility for completing the grid when possible to engage administrators in the process.

Agenda Item	Action Taken	Who Is Responsible for the Next Step	Deadline

Action Step

Improve message consistency and frame issues for clarity and transparency.

A key trait of school boards with strong communication programs is a consistency of message that is evident throughout all levels of operation and across all internal and external stakeholder groups. Maintaining a high level of awareness and information sharing becomes more challenging as a school system becomes more diverse and issues become more complex. Staff participants in all the internal focus groups felt messages were inconsistent across the school system, making it difficult for them to respond knowledgably to questions from the public.

Proactive communication can be fostered by implementing an issues-framing process that breaks down the communication elements to provide a clear framework for articulating and targeting key messages. This involves:

- Identifying issues and challenges the Board and schools are facing;

- Determining what stakeholders need and want to know, as well as the best vehicles for delivering information;

- Framing choices and options in language the public can understand; and

- Engaging stakeholders in helping to realize positive outcomes.

Develop and share key messages and talking points on important topics and critical issues.

To ensure that Board leaders and staff speak in "one clear voice" on breaking news and important issues, it is helpful to develop talking points that target the messages HWDSB wants to deliver. As the Board rolls out alignment changes or needs to address emerging issues or crisis situations, it is especially important to ensure that frontline employees can clearly articulate the HWDSB's plans and respond to rumors and/or questions from parents. In the event of a crisis, basic empathetic response statements and messages should be provided to Education Centre and school frontline personnel and teachers because they will be fielding questions from parents and the public. It is also critical that these key messages be translated and made available to non-English-speaking communities.

This strategy can also be applied to more routine activities that take place during the year. Create a calendar of times when schools are likely to be holding events that bring parents into the schools – meet the teacher nights in the fall, parent-teacher conferences, holiday and spring concerts, etc. Provide talking points for principals and teachers to use as they are meeting with parents. This is also an ideal time to distribute information to parents. For example, at a parent-teacher conference, the teacher can deliver one or two key messages about *HWDSB Reimagined* or a new academic initiative, and offer a related one-page fact sheet or direct the parent to the website for more detailed information.

Trustees and administrators should work with the Director and Corporate Communications staff prior to making public statements to ensure the accurate and consistent delivery of key messages. In addition to talking points related to a specific issue or topic, whenever Trustees or administrators are asked to provide a general overview of the Board at meetings of parent or community groups, they should have a list of programs and initiatives that highlight HWDSB's goals as well as information on progress toward those goals. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that school system leaders appreciate having it in order to feel confident that they are truly voicing the Board's position and key messages.

Identifying and framing key issues, developing key messages and talking points, and ensuring that administrators and staff are able to articulate the Board's position will help foster understanding and more transparency around leadership decisions. Preparing leaders at all levels of the school system with background information, rationale, key messages, and strategies for inviting input from staff, parents, and others and engaging them in dialogue about outcomes will help to "close the loop" on critical communications.

Establish communication expectations and protocols for Board leaders, superintendents and principals, and support and evaluate their efforts.

Communication expectations should be articulated in writing and distributed and discussed at leadership and administrative/principal meetings so that there is no question about each team member's communication role and responsibility. By expanding and better distributing the communication responsibilities of administrators, HDWDB can broaden its reach and create more internal trust and engagement among all employees.

In order to improve the communication infrastructure and ensure timely and consistent information delivery, clearly define guidelines that:

- Identify who is responsible for communicating with different employee groups;

- Outline procedures for how and when important information should be shared;

- Identify specific communication vehicles to maximize effectiveness and efficiency;

- Provide tips and strategies for improving inter-department and department to school communication; and

- Provide forms and templates for reporting the outcomes of meetings.

It also is incumbent upon the Board to provide the support administrators need to improve their communication skills. Focus group participants noted that some administrators are skilled in communication, but they also said pointed to inconsistent communication from department to department and from building to building as an area in need of improvement. Providing regular communication skills training for administrators (veterans as well as new hires) in areas that include media relations, crisis communication, staff and parent communications, cultural competency, and ambassadorship will help them feel comfortable and confident in their important communication role.

By expanding the communication responsibilities of administrators and principals HWDSB can broaden its reach and create more capacity for Corporate Communications to achieve strategic communication priorities. To demonstrate the Board's commitment to enhancing communication efforts, we suggest a communication component be included in the evaluation of administrators if one is not currently part of evaluation criteria.

Add a "how this [issue/decision/information, etc.] will be communicated" section to agendas for the Executive Council, superintendents, principals and Trustees.

This suggestion is simple, but can help to create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. Such a reminder on all agendas will stimulate discussions about decisions and issues, and will lead to better and more timely communication with key stakeholder groups.

Applying this simple process will help Board leaders articulate the messages around HWDSB's primary goals and will also help guide communication activities for all administrative staff. A reminder item on agendas can stimulate discussions about decisions and issues and lead to timelier and more strategic communication with key constituent groups. Questions to consider:

- **What is the issue or problem?** Discuss and clearly identify the core issue or problem. Identify the specifics that stakeholders need to know about the issue.

- **How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the Board will outline the issue or problem, and how it will be presented to audiences.

- **How does this issue/problem affect staff and stakeholders or impact other concerns?** Consider how a particular issue or problem will affect various groups or impact other concerns facing the district and community.

- **Which staff and stakeholder groups need to know about this issue?** Identify the 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 staff and stakeholders need to know about the issue, including the rationale behind decisions to date. Focus on three to five key statements or "talking points."

- **How will this issue be communicated?** Identify the methods and strategies that will be used to communicate with audiences, as well as who is responsible for communicating with each 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 on the issue with audiences.

In the early stages of using these questions, it is helpful to distribute printed copies for use in the discussion. Over time, these questions will become routine and an integral part of the communication process.

Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.

Trust and transparency are facilitated by communicating the rationale behind decisions and reporting the outcomes on all issues and projects. Although it is understood that Board leaders always strive to make good decisions on behalf of HWDSB students, negative perceptions and misunderstandings can emerge if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with the staff, parents and community. Explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale (the "why") behind decisions that impact specific programs, projects and school sites, and then reporting back to them on results will help to close the information loop and build trust in leadership. A critical role for Corporate Communications is ensuring that the rationale for decisions is communicated, along with the outcome.

This also extends to any committees, partnerships, and advisory groups. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that group members feel their time and input was valued. Communication follow-through is critical to involving stakeholders in a meaningful way, and ensuring that participation continues.

Action Step

Incorporate status updates on projects and initiatives as regular items on Board of Trustees meeting agendas.

One simple tactic the Board of Trustees can employ to ensure the communication loop is complete is to incorporate regular updates into meeting agendas. By reporting on the status of decision-making processes and the implementation of actual decisions as they move forward on each step is a more effective communication strategy than waiting to announce the final outcomes. It also allows stakeholders to ask questions and offer input throughout the process, rather than just at the beginning and end, leading to more buy-in and a better-informed public.

Action Step

Create internal "toolkits" for introducing new policies, programs or initiatives.

When a new policy, program, or initiative is introduced, each school should not have to "reinvent the wheel" in order to explain and roll them out. Provide a toolkit with resources such as the following:

- Related background, research, and articles;
- PowerPoint visuals and scripts for presenting information to staff;

- ■ Templates;
- ■ Effective practices;
- ■ Teaching and learning resources (i.e., videos, lesson plans, interactive materials, etc.); and
- ■ Tips for collaborating with colleagues from other schools.

This type of toolkit would ideally be posted in the staff intranet where resources can be added as they are developed, and staff at different sites can upload examples of what they are doing, discuss issues they are facing, share ideas, etc. By being proactive in getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the frontlines of communication, HWDSB can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the gap, co-opting the board's ability to manage its messages and communicate effectively.

Recommendation – 4

Restructure the roles and responsibilities of the Corporate Communications team to align work with Board goals and priorities.

The Corporate Communications department is increasingly challenged in managing daily information deadlines, media response, and large and small crises that can consume staff time in large boards like HWDSB. The challenges are made more difficult when staff roles and responsibilities are not aligned with the Board's strategic priorities. In order to keep pace, it is important that the department continue to adjust and transform itself as HWDSB changes.

Action Step

Focus on HWDSB's strategic priorities and proactive response, prioritize internal over external communication, and develop clear systems and processes for communication efforts.

Corporate Communications works to be responsive to a myriad of internal and external audiences and staff members are involved in a multitude of communication, engagement and partnership activities, both strategic and tactical. The day-to-day communication demands alone of a large and complex board can easily consume the majority of staff time. Such demands can leave little time or resources for strategic planning and evaluation. This can result in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced at the expense of focusing efforts on delivering key messages and engaging stakeholders in meaningful relationships with the schools. Communication programs, when not driven by a clear strategic vision, can easily fall victim to the latest communication crisis or priority request. When "urgent communication" becomes the focus, proactive communication opportunities that support the board's overall mission and goals are often missed.

Focus team efforts on strategic communication goals that reflect the Board's top priorities and outline the communication strategies and activities that will reach target audiences and deliver key messages to reinforce and document progress on strategic goals (see Recommendation 2).

The Corporate Communications team should use this *Communication Audit Report*, in conjunction with *HWDSB Reimagined*, to determine critical communication, engagement and partnership priorities. A thorough review may also indicate areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that need more support. Not only will this help in focusing the communication effort, it will also provide a better picture of staffing needs and help to ensure that Corporate Communications does not become a "catch all" for tasks that might better belong in other departments.

Action Step

Create a senior-level position for communications that assures communication research, planning, implementation and evaluation is a proactive and critical consideration in all leadership decisions.

Through feedback from the Executive Council in particular and the focus groups and audit review overall, it is clear that HWDSB requires a chief communications official to lead the communication function and provide strategic leadership. This role, with a title such as Director of Corporate Communications, should report to the Director of Education, be a member of the Executive Council and lead the Corporate Communications department. In addition, the Director of Corporate Communications should possess executive leadership skills such as the following:

- **Strategist** – develops a long-range course of action or set of goals to align with the Board's vision;

- **Mobilizer** – proactively builds and aligns stakeholders, capabilities and resources for getting things done quickly and achieving organizational and departmental objectives;

- **Mentor** – attracts, develops and retains talent to ensure that people with the right skills and motivations to meet organizational needs are in the right place at the right time;

- **Synthesizer** – integrates information from all sources to develop a well-informed, diverse perspective that can be used to optimize organizational performance;

- **Change driver** – creates an environment that embraces change, makes change happen and helps others to accept new ideas; and

- **Guardian** – ensures shareholder value through courageous decision-making that supports the Board's mission and vision.

The final job description for this role should be developed in consultation with the Executive Council.

Develop and communicate a process and procedures for internal staff on accessing and using Corporate Communications department services.

Participants in several focus groups said they are frustrated with the lack of timeliness in Corporate Communications' ability to respond to their needs. This may be a symptom of several things. It may reflect a lack of clearly defined goals and strategies that give communications staff a chance to say "no" to projects that are not in alignment with the Board's priorities, leading to staff being stretched so thin they cannot consistently meet deadlines. It may also reflect a lack of systems and processes within the department to manage the work. At the same time, all Board employees may not be aware of or understand the procedures and steps that are in place to best facilitate the delivery of services.

As a first step, we recommend that Corporate Communications staff outline procedures for accessing the most efficient service and receiving the best results. Develop a project schedule and provide timelines for different types of jobs to establish realistic expectations for production turnaround or response. There should be a step-by-step process in place for taking in new projects, assigning the tasks and timelines across the team, gaining approvals from internal "customers" and finishing on deadline. Once a process and procedures are defined, they need to be posted on the Corporate Communications department webpage and shared with other Board departments and staff so that they understand how to access needed services.

Part of the responsibility for the timely completion of projects lies with the person making the request. Internal "customers" need to understand that if they don't meet their deadlines for content or responsiveness it may lead to delayed completion times. The Corporate Communications team needs to map their internal processes as they are today, determine where and how projects are hung up, and then create a desired process map that will improve workflow and timeliness. There are also several production scheduling and project management tools available, such as Basecamp, that can help the team more effectively manage their work.

Given the limited communication resources in HWDSB, evaluate new communication initiatives and requests for project support from schools and departments based on whether they relate to the communication plan's strategic goals and objectives. This will help keep communication priorities in focus, so Corporate Communications staff are spending their time on the work that is most important to the Board. **Wherever possible, give priority to directly supporting schools**, since the communication audit findings show that most parents, students, and community members form their impression of HWDSB based on their experience with their local school.

Transition from acting as a fulfillment department for internal requests to one that proactively shapes the strategic communication priorities of the Board and equips employees to be effective communicators and ambassadors for HWDSB.

As Corporate Communications develops a strategic communication plan that aligns with the Board's goals, the team should also take time to meet face-to-face with internal customers. Meet with each Education Centre department and conduct a strategic review to identify their communication challenges and needs over the next one to three years. Corporate Communications should guide the dialogue, and engage department "customers" in a conversation about strategies that will best support the Board's goals and departmental/school-based needs. Equipped with strategic plan goals and a list of identified internal needs, Corporate Communications can use this *Communication Audit Report* as a baseline for development and begin to proactively shape high impact strategies designed to improve HWDSB's communication effectiveness and reputation.

Turn a critical eye on communication tasks and ask questions.

The Corporate Communications team needs to take a detailed look at all that it does and ask how current projects and tasks fit into *HWDSB Reimagined*. Some questions to ask include:

- What would happen if a specific program, activity or service were eliminated?

- How critical are the ramifications of the program, activity or service to the Board's strategic plan? If eliminated, how will they be impacted?

- What Board Goal does the program, activity or service fall under?

- How will the eliminated program, activity or service provide more staff time or resources for new strategic initiatives?

The Corporate Communications team should determine what should stay and what should go based on the vision and direction outlined in *HWDSB Reimagined*. Now is the time to make room for new, critical, strategic measures that support HWDSB's strategic goals.

Evaluate and track time on task.

The Corporate Communications staff is involved in a variety of different projects related to communication at both the Board and school level. In order to ensure that staff time is focused on the highest priority communication goals, it may be helpful for each staff member to record the actual time they spend on each task. This would allow the team to evaluate office 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 workflow plan to track each ongoing task or special project (i.e., newsletters/publications, special events, crisis communications, media response, website updates, etc.). This will allow staff to quickly assess the status of their workload, stay on top of deadlines, and readjust priorities as necessary.

Improve internal communication systems and processes.

Based on focus group feedback, there are not enough systems and processes in place across HWDSB to ensure consistent, collaborative, ongoing internal communication that helps employees more effectively do their jobs and serve students, and builds a sense of trust and transparency. In addition to creating new systems and processes in Corporate Communications, the senior leadership team needs to review how decisions are made, how input is sought, how information is shared and how feedback is given (see Recommendation 6). This need was especially apparent at the school level and impacts the experience parents, students and partners have with the schools.

Make frontline, school-based communication support a top priority.

In most organizations, internal stakeholders are the best brand ambassadors. Based on focus group comments, it would seem that HWDSB internal stakeholders are currently perceived more as negative representatives than as positive brand ambassadors. In concert with culture change and internal communication, a focus on unleashing staff, students and parents as positive brand ambassadors is essential.

The focus groups revealed that HWDSB frontline, school-based staff feel they do not receive the communication support they need to be effective ambassadors for their schools or the Board as a whole. In one focus group it was stated that, "Teachers are the frontline and we don't have support." Another

participant said quite bluntly, "They're more concerned with image than with doing something. They're more concerned with a tagline than supporting the frontline."

There is a need at all levels of the school system to prioritize communication and support to schools and the frontline. We suggest Corporate Communications look at ways to refocus resources to provide more direct support to schools. This might mean making school support the main focus for one of the Communications Officers or making it a portion of every team member's role. Creating an advisory committee and finding other ways to hear directly from frontline staff is essential to ensure that the department is in touch with the needs of this vital stakeholder group.

We know that the interactions of teachers, school administrative staff, custodians and others is the single most influential factor in determining parent satisfaction with HWDSB schools and shaping their perceptions. So, a focus on frontline, school-based communication is key to changing parent and community perceptions about HWDSB schools.

Action Step

"Close the loop" on communication.

As is the case in most large school boards, internal communication in HWDSB is a one of the more critical components of improving communication and reputation overall. Everyone wants to feel that they are a part of "something bigger" and that they have a mission and a sense of purpose. An intentional communication effort is needed to inspire employee buy-in and ownership of the strategic goals. At present, the internal communication effort in HWDSB is inconsistent at best and is not designed to provide staff with the information they need to serve as ambassadors and help communicate important messages about the schools, and in some cases, to do their job.

Improving internal communication should be a top priority of HWDSB's communication planning. A strong internal communication program should focus on creating a culture of employee engagement and empowerment, which is associated with highly effective organizations.

In the internal focus groups, staff talked about inconsistency in messaging and noted that information is not always shared effectively with all buildings and throughout all levels of the Board. This is partly the result of busy administrators assuming that employees already know the outcomes of decisions and they also may be simply forgetting to share information. Whatever the reason, it is important that HWDSB leaders become more transparent by "closing the information loop" and explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives and then keeping them informed about progress and results.

Ongoing changes in Board staffing have made it difficult for employees to connect with the correct staff member to provide answers to their questions. The lack of a system-wide organizational chart exacerbates the situation. Developing and maintaining an accurate organizational chart and posting it on the website and the employee intranet will provide a starting point for queries while creating transparency and breaking down walls between the Board and the schools.

Employees are frontline communicators who should receive important information before the media and public. When an issue emerges or when HWDSB begins to address a problem or concern, it is essential that senior leaders and building administrators incorporate a "staff first" focus into strategic communication efforts. When staff members rely on the "grapevine" or the news media to get information, it hampers the Board's efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. Employees are well connected to parents and community members and are considered by external groups to be a trusted source of information. They can serve as ambassadors if they are aware of current issues and the rationale behind the decision-making process and feel prepared to respond to questions.

To communicate effectively and credibly in "one clear voice," all employees must understand that good communication and public relations are not solely the responsibility of administrators and the Corporate Communications department. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept some of the responsibility for this role, from the board-level to part-time employees. They must understand the power and influence that they personally and collectively hold over public perception of, and satisfaction with, HWDSB schools.

Timeliness and message consistency are critical to developing a strong, effective internal communication program. When employees feel as though they are "the last to know" or information comes to them through non-district channels (such as the news media or parents), they do not feel they are valued members of the team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their roles as ambassadors for the schools.

By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for education and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages, and training when appropriate, HWDSB can exponentially expand its communication outreach in the community. Some suggestions for improving internal communications include the following:

- **Communicate key messages internally first.** It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to the public. Make the timeliness of communication to staff a high priority. Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media.

- **Use multiple vehicles to communicate.** Communicate messages to staff via meetings, official bulletins, email updates, video, voice/text notifications (for critical or time-sensitive communications or incidents of concern involving students), etc.

- **Increase opportunities for face-to-face meetings** that allow staff to ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.

- **Share key messages** with advisory committees, employee groups, and teacher/support staff union/association leaders.

Develop an e-news update for HWDSB employees.

According to the employee focus groups, HWDSB employees struggle to find a single source of trusted news and information. There isn't a consistent mechanism for communicating progress toward the Board's strategic initiatives and/or sharing information and updates that have Board-wide impact. Although the number of technology-based platforms needs to be dramatically reduced, there is a need for a platform that reaches everyone on a regular basis with important news and information. It will take a tremendous amount of discipline to decide specifically what should and should not be included in the e-news update, and to keep it brief and to the point, but it needs to happen. Director Figueiredo's internal column to employees is extremely well received. The e-news update could support and reinforce his column content.

The most effective use of an e-news update or e-newsletter is to "push" time-sensitive news, updates and key messages to stakeholders in brief, reader-friendly formats. While important information and news can be repurposed for use in a variety of formats, an e-news update targeting employees should not be just a repeat of what has already been distributed in other formats or readers won't continue to open it.

Keep the e-news update short – not more than a page and a half to two pages maximum. We recommend a single paragraph per topic with links to more detailed information. Stakeholders want pertinent information but they tend to want it in "small bites" that can be scanned quickly for critical points. Consider publishing on a regular schedule, preferably weekly following the Executive Council meeting, or bi-monthly and supplement it with special e-news alerts as needed for breaking news. Use this vehicle to keep the right people in the loop at the right time.

Additional tips for creating an effective e-new update include:

- **Create a recognizable banner and style for consistency, identification, and quick review.** Most users prefer news delivered in an html format rather than a PDF that requires another step to open. Ensure user friendliness by creating content that is accessible with as few "clicks" as possible. E-news updates should be published by Corporate Communications for all major initiatives and sent to employees when there is a breaking or emerging issue. Archive issues on the Staff Website and post the current issue to the home page for easy access.

- **Departments should contribute to the e-news update rather than maintaining their own individual newsletters.** Through readerships surveys and web analytics, you can demonstrate evidence of greater readership and impact by having departments contribute to the update as part of a cohesive internal communication strategy.

- **Share information that is sent to parents and the public** so that staff are informed and prepared to answer questions or clarify issues. To ensure that employees understand the importance of staying current on things taking place around the Board, consider providing links

to news releases and other information that will be distributed to parents and the public under a special heading such as *In the Know*.

■ **Conduct an annual reader survey.** Regular evaluation and revision based on reader's needs and interests will help make the e-news update a "must-read" publication and authoritative source of information about HWDSB.

■ **Distribute or post print copies for those employees who do not have regular access to a computer.** Email or mail the newsletter to staff on leave. Also, consider including others who are not direct employees, but who need information, such as bus drivers, crossing guards and substitutes.

Action Step

Revamp and rethink the *Friday Memo*.

Most of the staff focus groups spoke about the *Friday Memo*. In the absence of significant formal internal communication vehicles, staff do rely on the *Friday Memo* for information. However, many issues were raised regarding the format, how it is distributed, the amount of memos received, and the fact that they are sent only to principals and managers, etc. While staff have many issues with the *Friday Memo* and what it lacks as a communication tool, other communication vehicles need to be put in place first before substantial changes can be made. Ultimately we recommend that HWDSB aim to discontinue or substantially change the *Friday Memo* once more effective vehicles are implemented.
In the short-term, these suggested changes should be considered:

■ **All staff should receive the *Friday Memo*** in order to eliminate the bottleneck created by expecting principals and managers to sort the memos and forward them to staff.

■ **Provide a clear title for each memo.** For example: "ACTION: Principals, Vice-Principals, School Secretaries – Enrolment reports due March 31, 2017."

■ **Begin to create and maintain more distribution lists**, so that information intended for specific audiences can be sent directly, rather than relying on principals to be an email delivery system.

■ **Evaluate the value of the items being included in the *Friday Memo*** to determine if all items truly need to be included.

■ **Archive the memos by topic on the intranet.**

■ **Archive any forms related to a memo** along with the memo as well as in the forms section.

Consider forming a short-term working group comprised of key staff representatives who use the *Friday Memo* most frequently to suggest detailed recommendations for changes and provide feedback throughout

the process of making those changes. Changes might be introduced in a staged way, to determine whether one change is working before introducing the next.

Use employee orientation sessions to remind staff of their communication role.

New staff orientation sessions should contain a component on communication. Orientation programs typically review required forms and cover employment-related topics such as insurance and benefits, and often overlook the need to provide an overview of the school system's history, culture and key initiatives. Staff members should learn the sources of information and be reminded that as employees of HWDSB, they have a responsibility to read key communications sent out by the Board, departments, and their school. They should also be given guidance on how to be responsive to parent and staff requests. Consider preparing a summary sheet of "communication responsibilities" to distribute to all employees.

New employees should learn about *HWDSB Reimagined*, and any major programs or initiatives and their role related to these. The focus should be on generating excitement about the innovative programs going on in HWDSB and providing talking points and support that taps into the enthusiasm of new employees and empowers them to become positive messengers and ambassadors for the Board. Orientation for support staff is many times an afterthought, but they are also key communicators who are often seen as credible sources of information by the community.

Corporate Communications should consider developing a *Communications Handbook* to be used as an in-service framework for new staff orientation or communication workshops. The handbook could be shared and reviewed annually with principals and administrators, and sections could be highlighted as communication tips in the staff e-news updates.

When all staff members are provided with training and the resources to answer questions and share information with the public, it will create a strong foundation that instills trust and confidence among stakeholders, help to counter misinformation, and promote transparency.

Include school and department frontline staff in the communication loop.

School secretaries and other Education Centre office personnel are a critical part of the communication loop in any school system. They come in contact with numerous internal and external stakeholders every day. Each one of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between stakeholders and HWDSB. For these employees to function effectively in this role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them on a regular basis. The following steps can be taken by principals and administrators to ensure that key office personnel have the information they need to do perform well:

- **Provide scripts and Q & A documents** for frontline school office staff about key Board issues (i.e., ARCs, kindergarten registration, high school information nights and course selection deadlines, lockdowns at nearby schools, etc.).

- **Review daily and weekly schedules** so that staff are aware of activities going on in the school or department, as well as major events across the Board.

- **Review deadlines for reports** and other information required by the Education Centre or the Ministry of Education.

- **Review the major issues being discussed in HWDSB** so that office personnel feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents and the public.

- **Provide staff copies of important documents** such as the HWDSB calendar, crisis response procedures, agendas of Trustees meetings and other publications so they can answer questions and share information.

- **Include office personnel in planning meetings and discussions**, when possible.

Action Step

Provide communications training and add effective communication to the evaluation process for principals and administrators.

To improve communication consistency, we recommend that principals and administrators receive in-service training in effective communication as a component of their individual professional development plans. Training sessions on all areas of communication at the school-level and common traits of effective communication for department administrators and supervisors can help resolve inconsistencies, improve messaging, and ensure that critical information cascades throughout the Board at all levels.

We also encourage HWDSB to train principals in media relations so that they can serve as the spokespersons for their campuses on routine issues rather than depending solely on Corporate Communications. The Corporate Communications department should take the lead in crisis situations and high-level Board communications and provide support for principals as needed, and as they are available, on the positive stories and routine issues that occur on school campuses. This will create more time and opportunity for the Corporate Communications team to focus on strategic messaging and engagement activities that best serve the goals and mission of the Board.

The key to eliminating inconsistencies in communication is to tie communication to the evaluation process. If inconsistent communication is ignored, nothing changes. Providing the leadership team with the tools needed to fulfill all aspects of their roles will strengthen HWDSB and its reputation throughout

the community. Since people generally relate most readily to their neighborhood school, it is critical that those leaders at the school level accept and succeed in the role of chief building communicator.

Recommendation – 6

Transform the culture of HWDSB to build internal trust, engagement and pride in the Board.

The overall culture of HWDSB needs significant attention. In almost every internal focus group session there seemed to be lack of pride in the Board, a sense that things won't change, that employees aren't involved in decision-making and a general lack of trust. Organizational cultures are built over a long period of time and a major turnaround will not happen overnight. However, by being deliberate in focusing efforts on building internal trust, engagement and pride, HWDSB can significantly improve the overall culture and create new energy and improved levels of internal support.

Action Step

Undertake a formal employee engagement program.

The connection between high levels of employee engagement and organizational effectiveness has been well proven with more than three decades of research. Most large organizations measure employee engagement annually or bi-annually and have formal employee engagement programs. In the corporate sector, the engagement scores of an executive's team is normally one performance indicator. It is highly recommended that within the next two years HWDSB undertake a formal employee engagement program.

There are several organizations that offer employee engagement surveys benchmarked against other Canadian public sector organizations. Once the first survey has been conducted, formal employee engagement plans can be added into HWDSB's strategic plan. Established employee engagement programs are benchmarked and can be used to measure progress and changes in attitude.

Action Step

Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.

There are many ways to provide information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication. Research (including focus group feedback from this audit) shows employees prefer face-to-face communication from direct supervisors to emails, memos and newsletters. Administrators and supervisors who plan and run meetings are strongly encouraged to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. An opportunity to dialogue and ask questions promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the schools. Some strategies to consider include:

- **Include all staff assigned to the school in staff meetings.** Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important Board information and share key messages at staff meetings. Since students rely on teachers as their main information source about HWDSB news, it is essential that staff have the information they need to fulfill this communication role. Include support staff whenever possible. Share information relevant to them at the top of them meeting so they can be dismissed when topics related to instruction are discussed.

- **Hold regular meetings with Education Centre staff**, hosted by the Director of Education and/or senior administrators, to update them on activities and issues around the Board, provide opportunities for employees to ask questions, and ensure they feel connected and valued for their work in supporting the schools and educating students.

- **Hold regular meetings to increase "face" time and foster collaboration** when departments share responsibilities or are working on joint projects.

- **Regular staff meetings within departments should be an expectation.** Similar to staff meetings at schools, meetings should include all staff and cover both department-specific updates, as well as Board news. E-meeting technology such as teleconference or web conference should be used to include department staff at other locations. Create a culture in which it is an expectation for supervisors to hold weekly team meetings and weekly one-on-one meetings with their staff. These meetings are essential for relationship building and to achieve results on the Board's strategic plan.

- **When possible, encourage Education Centre staff to visit schools.** This could be developed into a program in which every staff member from the Education Centre visits a school at least once during the year. This helps build relationships, and helps central staff understand the realities of the internal clients they serve. Ideally, the staff will visit a school or person to whom they provide direct service. However, it is also a good opportunity for staff to learn about new programs, such as full-day kindergarten or Specialist High Skills Majors.

Action Step

Create opportunities for open, transparent two-way communication with Board leaders to promote trust and relationship building.

Trust and positive relationships are built on openness, transparency and a commitment to strong two-way communication. Consider the following strategies for creating new opportunities to connect with staff:

- **Create a Director's Staff Advisory Council** or similar feedback group**.** To integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a "big picture" view of employee issues and concerns, there may be value in establishing an advisory group made up of representatives from the schools and various Education Centre departments. This group could meet regularly with the Director and senior staff to provide input on initiatives or decisions under consideration

in HWDSB. This would give each employee group and department an opportunity to evaluate how decisions will affect them and offer solutions or alternatives "from the trenches" for addressing problems or improving procedures. It would also provide a venue for promoting understanding of jobs and responsibilities among employee groups and build a stronger team sensibility. This type of advisory council offers a way to involve employees at the beginning rather than the end of the decision-making process so that they feel their input is valued.

- **Hold a monthly or quarterly staff coffee or brown bag lunch meeting.** Invite a random group of 10-15 staff members to the Education Centre (or to a school) to meet informally with the Director. The goal should be to solicit feedback from staff members on what is going well at the schools and what areas need to be improved. Staff members have a chance to provide input, and the Director gains valuable insight into challenges and successes around the Board. By keeping the group relatively small, it ensures that everyone has a chance to comment, and no one is intimidated by speaking in front of a larger group. The meetings should be held to one hour and a Coroporate Communications staff member should take notes so that the Director can focus on listening to and interacting with the participants.

- **Share discussion notes and any follow-up actions with staff that participate in any meetings**, breakfasts, etc., so they know what was done with their input. Observations from the Director's face-to-face meetings with staff also should be shared, in a general way, through internal communication vehicles to promote transparency and let staff know that he is listening to their feedback.

Action Step

Provide employees with opportunities to play an active role in decision-making.

Participants in several staff focus groups mentioned that they did not feel involved in decisions that impact their jobs. As HWDSB moves forward in implementing the Board Goals, we believe it will be important to build a sense of personal responsibility and ownership among all employee groups. For this to happen, HWDSB staff need be directly involved in decision-making beyond just being charged with implementation – they need to play an active role in generating creative ideas for effective implementation and marketing as well as in creating tools and resources.

Staff morale can often hinge on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions must be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is particularly important for administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in school facilities across the Board. For example, many participants in the staff focus groups said that if they are asked for input, they don't hear back on the outcomes. These scenarios lead them to believe that "nobody is listening." Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance.

Strive to create more internal feedback opportunities, and provide more communication regarding existing opportunities. Make sure there are a variety of ways to provide input – not every staff member will feel comfortable serving on a committee. Also ensure there are opportunities for staff in all departments and schools – business staff as well as academic staff, part-time/casual staff as well as full-time. Look at particular staff groups who seem less connected and make a special effort to ensure they are included.

When feedback is received, make sure to close the communication loop, so that staff (and parents and students) know what has happened to the feedback they provided. Once they give feedback, silence becomes its own message to those who chose to participate in a feedback opportunity – even a negative response is better than no response at all.

An example of an award-winning internal employee engagement plan that would be an excellent model for HWDSB to investigate is Minnetonka Public Schools' Gold Medallion Award winning "Minnetonka Innovates Campaign."

Action Step

Celebrate staff contributions and successes.

HWDSB's climate/culture is not perceived favorably at present and needs attention. At the same time, employees are hesitantly optimistic about the new Director's leadership and the direction of the Board and Trustees. In addition to a lack of trust across the school system, there is a sense among employees that HWDSB is "less than" other boards on all fronts. It is unavoidable that these factors will also impact employee morale, so it is important for HWDSB to recognize it and find ways to support and reward staff for their work and loyalty. A combination of formal and informal acknowledgments and expressions of appreciation for staff efforts should be integrated into daily operations in a mindful and authentic manner.

The auditors didn't find a lot of evidence of formal or informal awards and recognition. Personal acknowledgement of successes – large and small – helps to build a positive school culture by adding a human touch.

One powerful way that HWDSB can recognize staff is to highlight how individual employees are supporting strategic goals and helping prepare students for the future. Feature success and recognition stories on the Board and school websites and on social media, provide commendations at Trustee or staff meetings, and send notes or make personal thank you calls. Acknowledging the role employees play in the success of students, as well as in raising HWDSB's reputation is key to building morale and fostering ownership.

Employee wellness, reducing workplace stress, and ensuring that staff members have a healthy work/life balance also should be taken into consideration. Organizations that have such programs in place tend to be seen as "top" employers, and they realize the benefits of such programs in increased employee morale and productivity.

Expand communication through a multi-channel effort.

No single channel of communication reaches every member of the community. The challenge is to make sure interesting and important information is regularly available in a variety of convenient formats, ensuring people know where to find it, and creating opportunities for positive interaction. Focus group participants said they receive their information from many sources – email, Twitter, MyHWDSB, principals, and "word of mouth" from people they know and trust.

Technology has dramatically altered how people access news and information. This offers the Board the distinct advantage of "pushing" information directly to stakeholders, without having to rely on outside interpretation by news media or the costs of postal delivery. Immediacy can allay concerns and clarify information through email, text and voice alerts. This maximizes communication capabilities, particularly in a technology rich environment such as HWDSB. However, HWDSB must develop a multi-channel communication effort, as there are still families without access to technology tools as well as others in the community who prefer more traditional communication methods. Several focus groups mentioned the need for traditional, as well as technology-based communication.

While not all HWDSB stakeholders can be communicated with electronically, their lack of access should not inhibit the use of technology to communicate. It is important to recognize that "high tech, high touch," mobile communication is how most of today's young parents communicate, so HWDSB must continue to remain current in this area and utilize appropriate social media and apps to connect with Millennial parents. In addition, while there are families who do not have computers and internet access at home, many do have smartphones or tablets that allow them to access apps and the web, so it is important to keep this in mind and not assume they are unable to connect with the district and schools.

To deliver information to parents and community members proactively, it is important to balance print and electronic communication and address publications from a reader perspective as well as with an eye to dual use for marketing and recruitment efforts. We encourage HWDSB to consider not only how information can be "pushed" to parents and community members more proactively, but how the school system can more effectively "pull" stakeholders in by becoming the go-to source for "what they want, when they want it." Lack of access to information is not the problem. The key in a world where the public is saturated with communications from multiple entities, both at home and at work, is getting stakeholders to read your materials. The following suggestions offer strategies for addressing external communication efforts:

Emphasize direct communication with stakeholders.

Part of the transition from information delivery to strategic communication is increasing HWDSB's ability to tell its own story well. As news media outlets, particularly newspapers, find the business climate increasingly challenging, making it difficult to sustain them and remain viable, their ability to cover education in-depth has significantly diminished. As a result, it is more important than ever that HWDSB establish direct lines of communication with its stakeholders.

This does not eliminate the need for Corporate Communications to be responsive to media needs. The Board has improved working relationships with local media and it is important to continue to grow relationships with reporters, editors, and news directors. However, this focus needs to be balanced with effective direct communication efforts, since by its nature media relations does not always guarantee coverage. A strategic communication program should focus on developing and maintaining transparent, two-way communication designed to reach all stakeholders in a myriad of ways. By continuing to build stakeholder relationships, HWDSB will be more successful in delivering its story and communicating its messages in "one clear voice."

Action Step

Balance print and electronic publications to maximize impact.

There is a need to develop a broader range of communication vehicles to better serve the information needs of all HWDSB stakeholders. By developing an annual editorial plan – based on the overall strategic communication plan and the communication needs and preferences of audiences – and balancing the use of print, electronic publications and digital communication, HWDSB can become more strategic and effective in reaching its stakeholders.

Action Step

Expand the use of video as a communication vehicle to tell the HWDSB story.

Video is an important component of communicating with technology. It can help enhance Board branding across the community and should be more broadly integrated into communication efforts. Consider producing storytelling videos that demonstrate the goals of *HWDSB Reimagined* in action and the role that staff and community play in supporting student achievement.

Short videos that demonstrate the passion, pride and commitment of students and teachers can be used on multiple platforms, and shared at face-to-face at presentations in the community. The tagline words, "Curiosity, Creativity, Possibility" offer an ideal opportunity to create a simple campaign that captures students and staff describing what each word means to them. Video was not mentioned as a source of

information in any of the focus groups, but used strategically if can connect internal and external audiences to the schools in an emotionally powerful way.

There is also an immediate need to begin developing video content in key languages to maximize its use across the school community. Video can increase the Board's ability to quickly reach non-English-speakers with key messages. Written translations take time to prepare, while short video messages can be recorded and posted to Facebook, Twitter and the website to reach specific audiences immediately.

Consider developing videos that touch upon issues that are important to parents and the community, not only to keep people abreast of the Board's overall strategic planning efforts, but also to address issue-specific topics and explain how decisions are made and the work implemented. We encourage HWDSB to expand its efforts in this area to improve understanding, provide transparency, reach a broader audience, and create ownership of student and school success.

Action Step

Be more purposeful about using partnerships, committees and other groups as key communicators.

HWDSB has a variety of community partnerships and committees that connect with specific audiences, yet their effectiveness as communication conduits varies greatly depending on the school or the individual Board contact. It is not enough to say that the Board has established partnerships and assume that information shared with them filters to the constituencies they represent. First Nations and other community partners were especially concerned that communication sometimes becomes a barrier to accessing services in some schools. Clearly, a systematic, consistent process for communicating and working with community partners needs to be defined and shared broadly at the Board and school level so that expectations can be managed on both sides and partners have the assurance that the needs of the audiences they represent are adequately met.

Action Step

Treat students as an internal audience and as a communication conduit to families and the community.

The school is the main focus of the educational experience for most students, but they also are interested in Board information that pertains to them and should be treated as an internal audience. The communication must be targeted to tweens and teens – they need to see how it is directly relevant to them. It is important to remember that students keep their parents informed about what is happening at school and in the school system, if they feel it is relevant. Ensuring that students are informed and engaged can be a vital strategy in engaging parents.

- Since students rely on their teachers for information, provide key messages/talking points to teachers, especially at middle and secondary school levels.

- At the elementary level, parents rely on notes in the agenda. On important issues, provide teachers with stickers – peel and stick information that can easily and quickly go right into the agenda and not get lost.

- Student announcements are an effective way to reach middle school and high school students. Provide schools with scripts for PA announcements or mp4 files. Create PowerPoint slides for the schools that show announcements on TV monitors. Leverage the student announcements by packaging them into an email update for parents.

- School hallways provide ample space for posters.

- Ask student councils to distribute the information. This will be particularly effective for those councils that host their own social media sites.

- Use social media to reach students. YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are the social media sites students frequent most often. The Board should leverage student councils' social media presence as a way to connect with students and create awareness of HWDSB's social media presence.

- Since students rely on each other for information about school and the Board, recruit and train student "ambassadors" to assist HWDSB in communicating to students. These students could be selected to receive special leadership training. They should be chosen to represent the cross-section of the school, rather than merely selecting the traditional student council leaders. They can serve as a conduit for two-way communication between HWDSB and students. They may also be able to receive volunteer service hours for their time.

- Communicate the strategic plan to students in a way that is relevant and meaningful to them. Help them understand how it relates to them.

- Provide HWDSB communication vehicles for students to share news about their school with the wider HWDSB system and communities – for example, student hosted events, fundraisers, etc.

- Students are not necessarily aware of programs offered by the Board for their benefit, such as SHSM, OYAP, night school and even co-op. The curriculum areas responsible for these programs require the marketing communication expertise of Corporate Communications to ensure that all students and families are aware of the full range of program offerings in HWDSB. By bringing communication together in a clear, consistent way and using information about the best ways to reach students and parents, the Board's resources can be used more effectively and awareness levels can be increased.

Provide regular progress reports on *HWDSB Reimagined.*

Regular updates and status reports on positive progress on the *HWDSB Reimagined* and other special initiatives such as the one-to-one technology program, should be clearly posted on the Board website home page to raise the profile and demonstrate accountability, transparency and a commitment to the HWDSB's mission. Frequent reporting-out to employees and community stakeholders will demonstrate the Board's ongoing commitment to remain focused on pursuing specific goals. Consider creating short videos highlighting classroom activities and lessons that demonstrate how goals are being accomplished, explain the outcomes or anticipated outcomes, and describe the next steps that will be implemented.

Develop and implement an integrated digital engagement strategy.

The internet, digital communication and social media have dramatically changed the way organizations need to think about providing basic information, as well as how they interact with internal and external stakeholders and the public. These new media are now critical communication and marketing tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of HWDSB and its schools. Given the significant percentage of staff, students, parents, and community residents who prefer to receive information through the web and social media, digital communications will be key tools for the future of HWDSB's communication program.

Websites and other forms of digital communications will never eliminate the need for print publications and other communication channels. However, the use of new communication technology tools to effectively reach and engage target audiences will only continue to grow and evolve. **Please note that this recommendation is very comprehensive and is presented to provide considerations for long range planning, not immediate implementation.** Some recommendations to consider include the following.

Create formal, multi-disciplinary governance for all internal and external web-based projects.

Create a formal structure, such as an Inter/intranet Steering Committee, to govern the HWDSB website, school websites, staff intranet, social media sites and any other sites "owned" by HWDSB.

- ■ Corporate Communications takes the lead on branding, look and feel, user-testing and the "user experience," navigation, the presentation layer, content, and the identification of new

functionality, interactivity, personalization and information to meet user needs. In addition, Corporate Communications should plan and deliver training and support to internal content owners who create content and maintain parts of the website.

- IT takes the lead on identifying, testing and implementing hardware and software that best meet user needs.

- Other key content owners may be included in the governance structure, particularly to identify internal training and support needs.

- Corporate Communications and IT should jointly chair this integrated web development functional team. The Director of Education should be the project sponsor.

- Decisions about website development and how resources are allocated should be made strategically, based on HWDSB's goals, analytics and monitoring, and proven return on investment.

Action Step

Develop a promotional plan for the HWDSB website, school websites and social media.

Develop an integrated marketing plan to promote awareness of, drive traffic to and encourage interaction with HWDSB's website, school websites and social media sites. Use the baseline data from this audit and analytics to set objectives for increased awareness, reach and interaction. Remember that, especially for social media, the ideal is engagement and interaction – not just "broadcasting" information. Look for ways to bring HWDSB stakeholders to Board sites for dialogue and interaction, not just to view static content.

Each HWDSB communication plan should have a web/social media strategy, tailored to the specific target audiences and to the goal and objectives of the plan.

Leverage existing activities. For example, make sure to consistently employ simple strategies such as ensuring that all HWDSB publications, signage, letterhead, newsletters, forms, email signatures, etc., have the website, school websites and social media URLs. Provide all staff with sample email signatures to ensure they are including HWDSB or school website and social media URLs, as well as the mission and vision statement.

Enhance HWDSB's social media presence to engage and interact with audiences.

HWDSB has a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook. HWDSB's YouTube channel is less active and its Instagram and LinkedIn presence are developing. Before expanding to any other social media channels, HWDSB must make sure to have a communication plan for these channels, connected to the Board's strategic plan.

The main aim, beyond creating awareness among stakeholders of HWDSB's social media presence, is to move from "broadcasting" to using a **community management** approach, which aims to engage with audiences on social media, **build relationships, curate content and build communities**. This will require a sustained, focused commitment of time and effort.

- **Set targets for significantly increasing the amount of interaction and engagement** based on current analytics and benchmarks. Findings from the communication audit and other secondary research indicate that Facebook is clearly where there is the most potential for growth, as parents (moms) are major Facebook users.

- Develop an annual, monthly, weekly and daily **social media calendar** to guide planning for each social media site. Monthly and weekly targets should be set (for example, double Facebook engagement from last week; increase page likes by 200, etc.)

In social media, both quality and quantity count. Infrequent posting of even quality content will fail to be noticed. It is important to think about social media from the users' perspective, not only take an organizational view. Content should be social and interactive and should fit the tone of the social media site and of the audience members. Consider the following guidance on daily posts, according to a definitive social media study:

Facebook – One or two per day (watch what time your users are online to determine the best time to post. Content should be posted before most of them begin to go to the site). Make sure to include a photo or video. Post the video directly on Facebook, then post to your YouTube site as well.

It's important to understand that simply posting to Facebook by itself is no longer enough. Your post will appear on the timelines of only about two per cent of your fans. That's because Facebook's business model is selling ads. To get your content seen, you need to "boost" your post (however, it's best to do it through the ad purchase option). Factor this into the marketing budget. If supported with high quality, engaging, shareable, user-focused content, the post boosts can be a very cost effective way to reach target audiences. The good news is that for about the cost of one print ad, you can begin to significantly change the Board's social media presence. Plan to coordinate boosted posts with pay per click ads. These should be developed through continual A/B testing of headlines, graphics, call to action, etc., to ensure value for money.

Twitter – Three tweets per day. Because tweets are so fleeting, plan to post each tweet three times (early morning, mid-day and suppertime) perhaps on different days, if the tweet is not extremely time sensitive, written slightly differently. Stagger the posts using a scheduling feature such as HootSuite.

Hashtags – These are an important way to track engagement beyond your own group of fans/followers. However, developing successful hashtags is a fine art. Again, think about the hashtag from the users' perspective – why would they want to use it, why would it appeal to them? The hashtag needs to relate to HWDSB in some way, yet does not need to be a direct reference. Some experimentation may be necessary to find one or more hashtags that resonate.

Remember that social media must be monitored in the evening and on weekends. Plan a schedule so Corporate Communications staff members are "on call" on rotation. Continual daily and weekly monitoring of social media metrics will enable Corporate Communications to determine what types of posts are most successful and shift strategy to optimize what's working and move away from less successful practices.

Maximize School Sites – Many schools, school councils and student councils have their own Facebook and Twitter sites and other social media presence. Create an inventory of these sites, including a list of contacts. Link to them from the HWDSB site.

- **Leverage school sites.** Many of these sites have hundreds of active users; by asking them to post Board content on their sites, you can greatly expand outreach. It's important to target the content to the audience. For example, information about the parent engagement symposium would be appropriate for school council Facebook pages, but not student council pages. Deadlines for choosing high school courses for next year, or information about new SHSM programs, would be relevant for student council pages.

- **Create a "Follow us" button on the HWDSB website home page** that links to a page with lists and links to HWDSB's official sites and school, council and student social media sites. Also link them on the schools' profile pages.

- **Consistently use and publicize the #hwdsb hashtag to promote Board news.**

- **Enlist the help of students to generate more video content** for the HWDSB YouTube channel. Consider user-generated content, such as student short films, parent stories about the first day of school, etc.

- **Subscribe to "Help a Reporter Out,"** www.helpareporter.com. Reporters looking for sources for stories they are working on post requests to this site. Using the list of media experts in the online News Room, this is an opportunity to help raise HWDSB's profile among media beyond the local communities and share the great things happening in HWDSB schools.

Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality, and multimedia to engage users.

The following are important trends that cross digital platforms to keep in mind as HWDSB moves forward in its planning and strategy development:

Functionality – Users expect to be able to "get things done" online – online banking, booking trips online and online shopping are becoming ubiquitous experiences for more and more of HWDSB members. They expect the same experience on the HWDSB website. Examples of functionality that would be compatible with the information needs of HWDSB members and Board goals include:

- **Subscription functionality.** Parents and other stakeholders appreciate the ability to subscribe to some website content. The subscription service would be improved by providing headlines that inform the user about the nature of the update, rather than merely "Board Update" or "[School Name] Update." Providing more categories of content to which to subscribe (based on users' areas of interest) will also improve this valuable service.

- **Register for school online.** This functionality, once developed, should be a true online form, taking users through the process step by step with tips and prompts. There should be only one step per screen (not a fillable PDF) and should be fully accessible, along with being connected to live support (see next bullet).

- **"Click to talk" and "click to chat."** An icon on the website that, if clicked connects the user directly via chat box or VOIP to a live customer services representative. This functionality could also be delivered in conjunction with CRM.

- **Pay online.** This is the ability to pay for student fees, school rentals, etc. "School Cash Online" seems to be that service for parents (make the link accessible directly from the HWDSB website, along with information about the service) but it does not seem to cover other situations in which payments need to be made to HWDSB. This functionality could be delivered in conjunction with CRM.

- **Book facilities online.** The ability of community members and organizations to view school spaces, availability, costs and make and pay for their bookings online.

Through user testing, identify other desirable functionality, especially functionality that connects to the HWDSB strategic goals and will save staff time.

Interactivity – From social media, we no longer expect static content, but rather we expect to be able to interact with the digital space. This is a benefit for HWDSB, because the aim should be to boost outreach, engagement and relationship building. Here are some ways to increase interactivity:

- **Let users comment on all articles**, or at least home page and blog articles. Provide commenting guidelines.

- **Allow users to "like" and "favourite" website content** and perhaps to rate the content. Expose these ratings for users to view.

- **Provide the ability for users to share content** to all major social media sites, as well as via email.

- **Add website widgets** to show "Most read" and "Most shared" content.

Interactivity can also be used when the organization is interested in consulting members regarding decisions or issues. This could include features such as online voting or other forms of online consultation (online town halls, online discussion papers, etc.).

Personalization – Encourage parents and other stakeholders to "join" the website and create a profile that will allow a personalized experience with the site. When "members" sign in to the HWDSB website, it will recognize who they are and present a personalized view of content and functionality, based on preferences in their profile. For example:

- Content tagged as being of high interest to the user is pushed forward.

- The relevant school website(s) could automatically be part of the home page navigation.

- Personalized home page settings and preferences that the user has established would be visible.

- Any discussion groups the user participates in are easily accessible.

- Content the user has generated would be easily accessible.

Research shows that users want to customize websites to their own interests and needs. The point is that, with current technology, there is the ability to deliver a powerful, interactive, personalized experience to each user – which is far more compelling and engaging than a generic, static website.

Content modeling – As digital platforms become increasingly fragmented, it is becoming more complex to manage content across many complex platforms. Content modelling is an essential methodology to facilitate this process. Content modelling documents all the different types of content you will have, without reference to the publishing format. In this way, you can capture important content, then publish or syndicate it across many platforms in various formats.

The content model contains detailed definitions of each content type's elements and their relationships to each other. You can capture a high-level version in an organizational chart-style diagram, or use a spreadsheet to capture a more detailed version. The level of detail in the model is determined by the

purposes you need it to serve. For example, one content type that HWDSB publishes is fact sheets. Content elements include:

- Heading/topic.
- Two-sentence summary of fact sheet.
- Subheads and text.

  [in a content model, this would be represented graphically, to show relationality]

Once the content model is complete, you can begin to map out how the content can be adapted to various platforms:

- Full fact sheet posted on website.
- Heading + first sentence could be used as a tweet.
- Heading + both sentences could be used as Facebook and e-newsletter blurb.

Use a robust content management system that will enable content chunking and syndication to various platforms in an automated manner.

Dynamic and multi-media content – Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality, and multimedia to engage users. The best websites and intranets provide more than just static content written from an organizational perspective. Multimedia features such as video, audio, photos and graphics engage users and keep them on the website longer.

- **Video.** Continue to look for opportunities to add video to enhance web content. Based on current research about audience preferences, videos ranging in length from 30 seconds to two minutes are ideal. Video has the advantage of providing content for HWDSB's social media channels as well.

- **Audio/Podcasts.** Podcasts are enjoying great popularity currently, thanks to "Serial" and many other trendy series. Quick and inexpensive to produce, there are many topics that could be topics for HWDSB podcasts.

- **Photos.** The visual impact of high quality photos can be immeasurable, especially with the rise of Instagram. Make photos part of the digital strategy, but ensure that the photos are communicating a message and telling a story, rather than being used as decoration or posting "grip and grin" photos. Make photos shareable and social with tagging and hashtags.

- **Webinars and webcasts.** At the high end of multi-media content are webinars and webcasts. There are many topics of interest to HWDSB members and prospective members, as well as stakeholders. Hosting webinars and webcasts (live and/or archived) from the HWDSB website would be another way to make the site a go-to information source.

- **Infographics.** Almost any "story" can be turned into an infographic. HWDSB's graphic design is a strength that can enhance strategic messages and content with engaging infographics that

convey key information. Infographics can be used on the website, shared with media, turned into micro-videos and repurposed on social media.

Brand storytelling – Brand storytelling, or brand journalism as it's often called, is the main technique successful organizations use to generate engaging user-centric content. Stories are the ideal communication vehicle – memorable, made-to-stick and people-oriented, if done right. By taking a brand "journalism" approach, HWDSB can look for "newsworthy" stories that at the same time fit with the brand messages and organizational goals.

HWDSB is well positioned for a brand storytelling strategy, since it has a well-designed website and a variety of social media channels, not to mention the schools' communication channels. HWDSB stories should be brought to life on the website through blogs, photos, vlogs, podcasts, and other vehicles that can deliver brand stories.

Social – Increasingly, users are seeing the digital space as a way to be social. The distinctions between websites and social media sites are becoming less distinct as users are weaving seamlessly between platforms on their mobile devices. Here are some ways to make the HWDSB digital space more social:

- **Twitter and Instagram have been integrated into the HWDSB website.** The Board may wish to either integrate its Facebook account as well or include it in place of the Instagram account, which is less active. For school accounts, consider also integrating their Facebook account as well as Twitter. If they have neither, consider providing the HWDSB's social media feeds.

- **Bring "likes," "favourites" commenting and other social media elements to the HWDSB website.**

- **Make sure all website content is easy to share out onto social media.** For example, well-written tweets, Facebook and LinkedIn posts, etc., are available for all website content.

- **Encourage user-generated content.** For example; consider creating a parent/community blog space, video sharing site, etc.

- **Create a way for communities to emerge.** For example, a site where school council presidents can easily have private discussions on topics of interest, and so on.

Mobile – The use of mobile devices is on the rise, growing 47 per cent in 2016. In fact, mobile is the only retail category currently not in decline. Research shows that more than half of people will use a mobile device, even if they are sitting right beside a desktop or laptop.

Mobile presents challenges for web development and requires a responsive design response. This is one of the reasons content modeling is so vital – the content model can specify that content is displayed one way on desktop, another way on a tablet and yet another on a hand-held device. If content is broken down into granular chunks, responsive design will have no difficulty delivering this. It is essential to do user

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testing with the HWDSB website on a variety of mobile devices and plan the look and feel, as well as content, with various mobile devices in mind.

Action Step

Investigate the possibility of implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) system to support digital communication and relationship building.

Part of the infrastructure that is needed by HWDSB for sophisticated management of thousands of users is a customer relationship management system. This software/database allows the organization to track every interaction an individual stakeholder has with the organization. A person can be a subscriber to the Board new releases and also a parent with children at more than one school, or a member of the public contacting the Board of Trustees on an issue of interest, etc.

Much as retail businesses use CRM systems to manage in-store and online sales, email subscriptions and much more, the same could be true for HWDSB. Such a system could track website subscriptions, night school registrations, permit bookings, parent emails and more in one database. Clearly, parents overwhelming prefer email communication, and it will take a sophisticated yet nimble system to manage this. Parent emails should be collected at registration and verified at the start of the school year and at parent teacher interviews. The infrastructure should be system-wide, but set up so schools can update and use their own school email addresses. This can be integrated into school websites and cashless school initiatives, for example. The marketing and crisis communication benefits of being able to send targeted emails to parents or to selected parents based on pre-determined criteria would be valuable to the Board in many ways.

CRM can also help to manage online functionality, such as online banking, registration, event management and more based on the strategic business needs of HWDSB.

For Corporate Communications, CRM would be a valuable tool, as it would allow the Board to create content marketing or relational "campaigns" with target groups. For example, when families register for kindergarten, a "campaign" in CRM could be automated to send out regular content from registration until the first day of school with information about how to prepare for the starting school. For Grade 8 families, a year of content could be automated to help prepare them for the start of high school.

We encourage HWDSB to consider investigating options for implementing CRM when the budget allows.

Continue to improve and leverage the HWDSB website as a communications hub.

The HWDSB website was identified by focus groups participants as a communication strength. HWDSB can build on the current strengths of the website and improve areas that are not working as well for users. Suggestions to consider include:

- **Continue the work of ensuring that the HWDSB website is accessible and AODA compliant.** It is clear that HWDSB is committed to progressing toward a website that is accessible in compliance with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. These efforts should continue. This is not just a matter of meeting legislative requirements – it is a service to stakeholders who will be better served if the site is fully accessible – and ultimately better communication for all. All photos and graphics require explanatory text. All PDFs or other linked documents must be accessible. They should be tested on more than one type of reader used by those who are visually challenged to ensure compliance. Videos should be closed-captioned. Eventually, PDFs should be used as infrequently as possible on the site. By moving to a practice of "accessibility at source" for documents and resources, HWDSB will improve its ability to deliver a more accessible website and also increase inclusion competence within the school system. This will involve staff training and the provision of templates and guidelines for staff.

- **Enhance the home page to engage users.** Though the power of the home page is not what it once was, the home page is still the most valuable "real estate" on any website. The HWDSB home page photo is clean and professional, but there are a number of enhancements that could result in more user engagement. Changes should only be undertaken after being confirmed through specific user testing.

    - **In recognition of the changing demographics of HWDSB, include the word "welcome" in the top languages spoken by newcomer families.** This should be linked to at least one page of multilingual content with basic information about how to register for school. Eventually, these could be built out into more extensive micro-sites and additional languages can be added. Make sure to include French and any other First Nation language that is significant for the communities HWDSB serves. The Google translate button should be removed; this is not an effective way in which to provide translation service to the HWDSB parent community.

    - **Top navigation should use "mega menus."** In addition to dropping down when users hover over the navigation button, mega menus expose key content from the section without the user needing to click. Each mega menu could feature the top three to five content items (based on analytics), as well as the full navigation for the section. This can save users multiple clicks and expose valuable content. The aim should be, whenever possible, to deliver content to users within one click**.**

- **Ensure that the 10 most searched/visited pages are included in the home page navigation.** This could be done through a "Quick Picks."

- **Provide "Share This" options for all home pages and websites** or make the content socially shareable in another way.

- **Ensure that the home page, every banner and every major website section has a clear and compelling "call to action."** For example, "Register for school," "Have your say about our budget," etc. Longer website pages need the call to action in more than one spot. Remember that the more a user has to scroll down a website page for content, the less likely it is that the content will be seen.

- **Consider future home page enhancements.**

  - **Consider adding the ability to comment** on articles throughout the site to increase user engagement.

  - **Add widgets such as Most Viewed and Most Shared** and a tag cloud that will allow users to navigate stories by keyword tags.

  - **Enhance information/engagement** about the strategic plan, mission and vision, and progress on achieving goals. Provide detailed information about the activities related to the strategic plan, including current annual operational plans and projects. Accountability would be enhanced by making it easy for members and prospective members to access data about the progress as HWDSB works towards achieving its goals. This section would also be an opportunity to help members understand their role in the strategic plan. The website could also become one place for stakeholders to express their views – through surveys, discussions, webchats, viewing multimedia content (stories) that bring the goals to life, even the ability to post their own comments or short videos.

  - **Use the website to deliver key messages.** Consider information placed on the website in the context of how it delivers key messages. Home page news and other content should serve to reinforce the key messages and objectives of the strategic communication plan, as well as brand storytelling objectives.

  - **Aggregate new website content into weekly or biweekly e-newsletter.** Provide subscribers with regular news by aggregating new website content and social media posts, along with any other Board news into an e-newsletter. Each item would be the headline and lead paragraph and the user could click to read the full story online.

  - **Use the website to respond to issues.** Use the HWDSB website to respond to emerging issues. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion, post accurate, factual information in this section to "set the record straight."

- **Incorporate use of the website into the crisis communication plan.** Websites are also critical information conduits during crises, and it is helpful to keep this in mind when planning content for the site. Develop crisis information pages in advance. The pages should contain basic information based on pre-determined crisis scenarios (e.g., death of a student or staff member.) Consider creating at least one "dark" page for each scenario in the crisis plan, to be activated if needed. The page can then be activated or posted on the website should it ever be necessary.

- **Calendar website content to ensure it is current and accurate.** For each item of content on the website, determine a calendar date by which it should be removed from the site or reviewed to ensure it is current/accurate. At minimum, review the content annually. This calendar will also identify the title of the staff member responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the content – normally the person responsible for the content in "real life" should also be responsible for the website content review. Some content, such as the fact sheets, is several years old. Nothing on the website should have a date of more than one year ago on it.

- **Enhance the "Media" section of the website to create an online "Newsroom."** Easier access to additional information will make the site more "media-friendly." Talk to the reporters who cover HWDSB, education and related issues to determine what information to provide in the Media online newsroom.

- **Bolster media content.**

  - **Post all news releases from most current.** Archive previous years' news releases, going as far back as possible. Currently, news releases are only archived for 2015 and 2016. The archive should go back at least five years.

  - **Include current and archived Board motions, agendas and minutes.**

  - **Link to Trustees photos, bios and contact information.** List committees and their charges. Provide fact sheets on HWDSB that include data such as enrolment, staff numbers of schools and students, demographic breakdowns, etc.

  - **Include links to bios and high-resolution headshots of the Director and Senior Staff.** Provide an organizational chart and areas of responsibility, as well as links to social media accounts, contact information, videos, publications and other relevant material.

  - **Link to high-resolution artwork** of the HWDSB logo, any graphics of key initiatives, photographs of the HWDSB Education Centre, and other important visuals.

  - **Provide contact information for primary media contacts** (including email, cell phones and any other after hours contact information).

- **Include an archive of publications.**

- **Post videos, b-roll and/or photos of breaking news or special events.**

- **Provide a media sourcebook – a list of HWDSB staff and members who are experts on various topics of potential media interest. Suggested media stories might include:**

  - Homework.
  - Early learning.
  - FNMI learning.
  - Special subject areas such as math and literacy.
  - Nutrition.
  - Study tips.
  - How to help children deal with grief.
  - How to deal with divorce or blended families.

- **Provide media policies and guidelines for:**

  - **Requesting interviews with HWDSB staff or members.**

  - **How HWDSB will communicate with the media in a crisis.** Keep the list up to date and add topics and contacts as issues become "hot topics." Also include members and staff with interesting or unusual areas of expertise.

  - **If there are issues, HWDSB should "break" the news on its website and social media channels first.**

Action Step

Keep school websites up-to-date to build their effectiveness as a communication resource.

Parents and the community members are increasingly looking to school websites as an important information source. School staff wish to communicate more effectively through their websites, but feel they lack the skills, time and training to do so. Focus group participants acknowledged the lack of consistency among school websites – some are up-to-date and effective while others are not. Effective, up-to-date school sites can help strengthen the HWDSB brand, but poor sites will have the opposite effect. It is important that information on all of the HWDSB school websites be current at all times. While it is comparatively easy to get people to visit a website once, the challenge is getting them to return regularly for new information.

More direct user input from school staff, parents and students would help HWDSB determine specific improvements needed to school websites. The following suggestions are based on focus group comments, a review of existing school sites and best practices among other school boards.

- **Focus on school websites as the communication hub with parents/community.** Parents in the focus groups indicated there are too many communication channels currently. School websites, with Twitter, Facebook, and teacher class sites integrated, should be the communication hub for parent communication, based on the preferences expressed by parents.

- **Increase support for school websites.** Many individual schools lack the staff, time and skills to keep their websites current. Today's connected parents expect to be able to access school information via the web, communicate quickly via email and receive important information from the school in a timely manner, so it is important that HWDSB determine ways to increase support in this area.

- **Individual school websites must be planned and evaluated with parent needs in mind.** As parents come to expect ready access to online information about their children's schools, it is also important that the school websites provide current information and opportunities for parents to supplement the school program at home. The inconsistent quality of individual school websites is a significant issue, as is the disparity between the schools that have active sites and those that do not.

- **Consult with school staff to determine the support they need and the best way to deliver this support.** This could take the form of training (in person, as well as web-based), template and ready-to-use web content (stories, graphics, photographs, video), direct one-to-one support, on-call technical support, etc. In reviewing school websites, it is evident that stale, dated content is an issue for a number of school sites.

- **Ensure schools consistently use the website template for brand consistency.** HWDSB is using template websites for its schools, which is an effective way of providing consistency across the school system. However, a closer look at a number of school sites shows that departments and clubs are still using their own templates and off-site hosting and simply linking to the school site. More discussion is necessary with schools to complete the transition or to understand what further support they require to fully embrace the template website approach.

- **Support high-value functionality on school websites.** Create the functionality for parents to subscribe to news and emergency alerts via the school website. This will allow the school and Board to communicate rapidly with parents if there is an urgent situation on campus or in the local vicinity, as well as providing more routine information electronically for those parents who prefer this type of communication. Most parents prefer school information to be emailed to them, rather than having to go to the website or wait for hard copies of newsletters, etc. Develop and support new functionality that parents identify as valuable to them – for example, pay or donate online, complete and submit forms online, etc.

■ **Enhance and support teacher web pages.** Parents and students are very interested in receiving information via teacher web pages. To ensure some consistency and support for these pages, consider providing teachers with templates and samples for their classroom/homework page. Follow up with teachers to determine what support they need to use their teacher page effectively. Web analytics can help demonstrate how often they are being accessed. Feedback sessions will help to determine how these pages can be made more user-friendly and what additional information and functionality parents and students want. Subscription functionality is also essential for teacher sites. Parents don't have time to go to these websites to check if new content is available; information should automatically come to them.

■ **Promote school websites as the go-to source for parents and the community to access school news.** Schools should use every opportunity to promote their website by requesting that all school staff add the website address to their email signatures and making sure that the website address appears on the school letterhead, envelopes, business cards, newsletters, school signage and any other material produced by the school. Each school should consider its website to be a key component of the overall communication, marketing and branding strategy. Consider developing a template marketing plan for school websites, to get schools started.

Action Step

Improve website usability through robust, user-intuitive search functionality.

One of the most important items of functionality on a website is the search functionality. Users are more likely to go directly to the search box than to use traditional navigation. It is essential that the search is intuitive and user-friendly. Some ways to maximize the power of search include the following:

■ Implement *predictive search*[1] functionality.

■ Implement *editorial picks*[2] as part of the search functionality. Using web analytics, determine the top searches and the top searched keywords[3]. For each of these top search terms, develop three to five suggestions of relevant content within the website — headline (hot linked), along with one sentence or phrase to describe the content. These "best bets" would appear at the top or right of the regular search results whenever one of the top keywords is searched. This can be used to promote/market programs and messages strategically, especially at key times of the year (e.g., kindergarten registration, course selection, back-to-school, the rollout of a new policy or program).

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[1] *Predictive search* – when a user begins typing the first few letters of the search, possible topics that start with those letters appear, which the user can select from if they wish

[2] *Editorial picks* appear above or to the right of search results. Often headlined as "Best Bets," they are search suggestions to the user. They supplement the search functionality with human judgment.

[3] The top 25 search terms can account for *up to half* of all searches. The top 1% of search terms generally represents 25% of all searches.

Conduct research and user testing to determine future enhancements to the Board and school websites.

It is important to conduct ongoing evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of the HWDSB website, school websites, the staff intranet, and staff and member email usage. Though data is available through Google Analytics, it is not apparent that these analytics are being used in decision-making as part of a commitment to creating a highly user-friendly digital presence. The Inter/intranet Steering Committee should regularly review web analytics statistics to gain a clear understanding of how various audiences are using these digital communication channels.

- **Host "hands on" sessions with various audiences to gather user feedback.** Bring together groups of six to 10 users. Give them a series of typical tasks to complete, such as:

  - Find information about how to register for school;

  - Find the name and contact information of their local Trustee;

  - Locate ARC information; and

  - For parents, access their children's teachers' web pages.

  After performing several tasks, seek input about how user-friendly the experience was and how it could be improved. Ask users what additional information, interactive features, and functionality they would like to see added to the website.

  Perform this type of user testing for the HWDSB website and sample school websites. In addition, conduct user testing before implementing major new changes to any of these websites to test that the new features are working as users would expect or want them to. This testing should be an integral ongoing part of HWDSB's digital strategy.

  All web projects should be developed using an iterative approach, in which continual user testing and feedback is a normal part of the process, and the desire to make the sites as user friendly as possible is one of the prime drivers.

- **Review "best in class" websites and intranets.** Examples of award-winning school board websites are available in the list of winners at www.nspra.org/awards/pubs-media-winners-2016#Internet_Intranet_Website. View websites and intranets that have received awards from IABC, CPRS, Apex, PR News and other communications organizations. Webinars offered through such organizations as IABC, PRSA and Ragan Communications also provide the opportunity to get an inside view of award-winning intranets. These webinars can also provide valuable "how-to" insights. Extensive web usability information is available at www.useit.com.

Enhance the Staff Website as an internal communication hub.

The Staff Website was a source of much discussion during the staff focus groups. A great deal of frustration was expressed about the difficulty with finding information, outdated information and many other issues. Participants cited the confusion caused by too many fragmented and unconnected communication channels. They also noted the amount of time it takes them to find what they are looking for. Many others said they call other staff members to ask where to find relevant documents rather than trying to locate the items themselves. As a result, the collective loss of staff productivity throughout the entire school system is considerable.

For the sake of organizational effectiveness and to support internal communication throughout the Board, we strongly recommend that a redesign of the Staff Website be made a top priority. In its current state, the Staff Website is hindering effective Board communication. Through a redesign, an excellent opportunity exists to develop a highly user-focused intranet that enhances the ability of employees to do their work effectively. By going beyond the concept of a basic document repository, the intranet can be developed as a powerful tool for internal communication and collaboration. The design of a staff intranet should be undertaken using the following principles:

■ **Involvement.** Involve users at every stage of the development of the intranet. Staged, iterative development and implementation will allow HWDSB to roll out certain high-value functionality and content first, test it and make modifications and improvements that will enhance future phases of implementation.

■ **Personalization.** Staff will need the intranet to be a true internal portal. When a staff member logs in, the portal should recognize the individual employee and present a version of the intranet home page customized for that employee. The information and online tools pushed forward for an employee in the Human Resources department, for example, would be different from a Grade 4 teacher or a social worker. Through user-friendly navigation, all content and functionality would be accessible to all staff, if they need it. This approach will make the most efficient use of staff time. Staff should also have remote access to the intranet. All staff, including casual employees, should have home access to the intranet.

■ **Customization.** Staff will need the ability to customize the intranet to their individual needs. So, parts of the intranet home page could be "locked down" with HWDSB information and tools that are essential, while other parts can be customized to the needs of the individual (i.e., each employee can choose pages they access frequently to be linked directly from their customized section of the intranet home page).

■ **Functionality.** A significant focus for the intranet should be on delivering functionality that improves efficiency, eliminates or reduces manual processes and duplication of effort and helps

staff do their jobs more effectively. Some examples of high-value functionality that could be delivered via the intranet include the following:

- Submission and status tracking of facilities work orders.

- Submission and processing of forms such as travel claims.

- Delivery of required training through interactive online modules.

Prioritizing which functionality to deliver should be based both on organizational needs and user input. Evaluation of improved efficiencies and service standards can demonstrate the intranet's return-on-investment.

- **Web 2.5 capabilities and collaboration tools.** The intranet can serve an important function in facilitating communication and collaboration between staff members through Web 2.5 tools. For example, many staff members in the focus groups talked about how difficult it was to find out who does what. The Staff Website can provide an internal directory, which has many of the features of an "internal Facebook," providing a profile of information about staff members, including key areas of responsibility and photos. A staff member looking up a colleague in the directory would see whether the person is "online" or not, facilitating contact. Many other collaboration tools, such as wikis and team spaces, could be rolled out based on identified needs.

Recommendation – 10

Strategically increase the visibility and accessibility of Board leaders in the community and schools.

External focus groups were complimentary of HWDSB's increased engagement in the community under Director Figueiredo's leadership. They hope that efforts to connect with community partners, organizations and government officials will continue to expand. With the implementation of *HWDSB Reimagined*, it is an exceptional opportunity to build on that and strengthen connections Board leaders have with staff and the community.

Many of the focus groups talked about the need to build relationships with HWDSB's internal and external stakeholders. School-level teachers, staff and principals want to see the Director and other Board leaders in their schools, asking questions, talking with them, and demonstrating care and understanding of the successes and the challenges that are part of teaching and learning in the 21st century. Face-to-face communication is critical to building understanding and a true team of people who are committed to carrying out HWDSB's mission and goals.

Raise the awareness and profile of *HWDSB Reimagined.*

HWDSB Redesigned sets the direction and drives the annual work of HWDSB. This is an important reference document for both staff and the public, and as such should be clearly accessible on the home page of the HWDSB website. Regular updates and status reports on positive progress toward strategic goals should be included on meeting agendas and posted to the website to raise the profile and demonstrate accountability, transparency and a commitment to the Board's mission. Currently, the *HWDSB Redesigned* is listed as "Strategic Directions" at the bottom of right hand column under the "About Us" tab on the website. Unless site visitors know what it is, why it is relevant, and are specifically looking for it, it is unlikely they will stumble on it by accident. Strategies for raising the profile and garnering support for the plan include:

■ **Schedule a series of individual meetings with influential community leaders** (i.e., elected officials, major employers in the Board, business partners, newspaper editors, local college/university presidents, leaders of the various ethnic communities, etc.). Introduce HWDSB's strategic priorities and have a dialogue about how HWDSB student success supports the economy and quality of life in the Hamilton-Wentworth community. These leaders can then be cultivated as key communicators.

■ **Schedule meetings with key stakeholders such as the school councils, advisory committees, and union leaders, etc.** Share the Board's strategic goals, the role they have in contributing to the goals and learn about their expectations for the future of HWDSB. Taking the plan back to key internal groups will establish a foundation for building trust and open communication.

■ **Use short videos from the Director to report out on the meetings and feedback that leaders receive in the community and in internal Board groups.** While the Director and Board leaders cannot be in all places at all times, it is important to connect them to critical communication venues that will have the most impact. Building trust in HWDSB leadership should continue to be a priority, both internally and externally. By maintaining open communication about decision-making processes, the administration and Trustees can clearly demonstrate their commitment to a "transparent" style of leadership that allows stakeholders to monitor and participate in the educational process. This not only helps to foster trust and credibility in the Board, but also encourages all stakeholders to assume responsibility for the success of their schools.

Develop a deliberate strategy for the Executive Council to visit schools throughout the year with a specific focus.

Face-to-face interactions are the most effective way to build strong relationships and should remain a high priority strategy for Board administrators. Continue to seek opportunities for the Executive Council to spend time in classrooms visiting with teachers and sharing personal observations on social media, in Executive Council and other administrative meetings, at team meetings and via photos. Observations from the visits can be incorporated as stories in presentations to internal and community groups as examples of the Board goals in action and to provide validation and feedback on the work being done.

While this is time-consuming, employees appreciate any efforts by Board administrators and Trustees to visit schools and spend time in classrooms and lunchrooms. Parents also want to see leaders engaged in school activities and attending meetings when possible. When leaders are visible in the schools, it helps build staff morale and counteract the perceptions that Education Centre administration is disconnected to the schools, which was a frequent comment in internal focus group sessions. Administrator visits should not be strictly limited to business meetings or problem-solving, but also should be designed to gather insight and address specific focus areas as needed. Efforts also should be made to visit food service, transportation and maintenance support staff.

We recommend that all visits be reported on in some fashion as a follow-up. For example, the Director, administrators and Trustees could report on visits or attendance at special events as a regular part of the Trustees' meeting agenda. Other avenues include adding brief notes in school and Board publications or websites and sharing impressions at staff meetings. Not only do regular site visits raise the visibility of school leaders, it also gives them "bragging rights" about the schools, which builds pride and staff morale.

Consider producing regular video messages from the Director of Education.

Internal focus group participants indicated they would welcome more direct communication from the Director. Director Figueiredo has already used video successfully for staff outreach, and a regular video message would provide an excellent opportunity to expand outreach and direct connection to employees across the Board. Video messages can be used to highlight progress toward goals, celebrate student and staff successes, and deliver key messages about HWDSB progress toward its goals.

Encourage HWDSB leaders to actively participate in local civic and service organizations.

While strong support and involvement from community and business leaders is critical for the schools, it is equally important for Board and school leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the community at large by taking an active role in various civic and service organizations or philanthropic boards. This also provides ongoing opportunities to share information about HWDSB with influential community leaders and ensure that it is well represented with important community groups.

Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

HWDSB is a school board where leaders and staff are committed to providing students with a high-quality education. Under *HWDSB Reimagined*, the Board is moving forward under a strong leadership team and to accomplish its mission and goals and build its brand as a quality school board.

HWDSB faces the same communication challenges all school systems face in today's complex education environment. The first step toward solving these challenges lies in recognizing them, and Board leaders understand that effective communication is critical if the school system is to move forward. By making communication a major goal in *HWDSB Reimagined*, you have acknowledged the need to improve in this area.

Making the commitment to improve communication is the first step in creating an exemplary communication/public relations program that builds support for education and understanding of the important role public schools play in our communities and nation. We believe that HWDSB has the components necessary to continue to improve and excel – visionary leadership, dedicated staff, strong community support and a commitment to planned, strategic communication.

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report*. The recommendations offer strategies and tactics designed to address immediate needs, as well as those that are ongoing or that we believe should receive future consideration as part of long-range planning. **There is certainly more here than can be accomplished in a single year.**

The recommendations in this report are presented with the intention of helping HWDSB to not only enhance and expand current efforts, but to continue incorporating new components that allow it to take the communication program to the next level. This report is intended to serve as a "roadmap" for the future and a compendium of best practices in school communication that HWDSB can use as a resource to build and expand its communication program. **New communication components will need to be introduced when budget, resources and staff capacity allow.**

There are a number of recommendations that apply to all departments and schools that HWDSB can begin implementing right away, but it would be unreasonable to expect the Corporate Communications department to undertake more than two or three of the major recommendations in a year given current responsibilities and staffing. This report can serve as a planning guide for the next several years to help keep the work on track.

It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem unmanageable or overwhelming. HWDSB has begun to develop a solid communication program and is increasing the use of new communication technology. The recommendations presented are not intended for the Corporate Communications department alone. All Board leaders must be accountable for improving communication and taking the lead in some of the areas addressed in this report.

We encourage HWDSB leaders to review the recommendations in this light and with an eye to how specific communication responsibilities and tasks might be distributed among administrative teams. The Director and Board of Trustees also will need to prioritize recommendations and future staffing considerations based on budget and resources. You may also choose not to implement some recommendations. We have provided a broad spectrum of options based in proven practice that will allow HWDSB to focus on those it feels are most applicable and appropriate to current needs.

Strategic communication programs in any organization are most successful when treated as a management function that is planned, continually updated and revised, and evaluated. It is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools. HWDSB has an experienced leadership team that is well positioned to build on the foundation of the existing communication program to ensure it meets the needs of a growing, 21st century school board.

Appendix

- Focus Group Discussion Questions

- What Is NSPRA?

- Auditors' Vitae

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Questions for Public and Staff

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
    - From your perspective, have perceptions about HWDSB changed in recent years?

2. What do you like best about the schools here?
    - In what areas can the district improve?

3. When it comes to communication with you, what does HWDSB do well?
    - In what ways can communication continue to be improved?

4. What (or who) is your best source of news and information about the board and the schools?

5. What is the best way for the district and schools to deliver important information to you?

6. Is the content on the website helpful and informative?
    - Is it easy to find what you are looking for?

7. Are the board's social media accounts helpful sources of information for you?

8. (*For staff*) As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?

9. Do you feel that board leaders provide opportunities and truly *listen* to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?

10. What is the greatest communication challenge facing HWDSB in the future?

Additional Questions for Administrators

- As an administrator, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job?

- Are your communication responsibilities clearly delineated so that you know what information to share, whom to share it with, and when?

- What are your greatest communication challenges in your role?

- How can the Corporate Communications department better assist you with your overall school/department communications?

Questions for Board of Trustees Members

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the school system's current image in the community?
   ▪ From your perspective, have perceptions about HWDSB changed in recent years?

2. What do you consider to be HWDSB's greatest strengths?
   ▪ In what ways can the board continue to improve?

3. When it comes to communication, what does HWDSB do well?
   ▪ In what ways can communication continue to be improved?

4. Which of the board's current communication vehicles do you think are most effective in delivering HWDSB's message?

5. Do you feel that the opportunities now provided for people to have input and express their views on important decisions are being accessed?
   ▪ How might the Trustees and administration better engage parents, staff and community in helping address the issues and challenges HWDSB faces?

6. What is the greatest communication challenge facing HWDSB in the future?

Questions for Student Leaders

1. What do you like most about your school(s)?

2. What has been the best part of your high school experience so far?

3. What could the school do better to improve your high school experience?

4. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?

5. How do you learn about what's going on at school and around the board?

6. How can HWDSB better engage students in decisions that impact your education?

7. As a student, what information is most important for you to receive from your school and the board?
   ▪ What is the best way to deliver information to you?

8. Do you ever visit your school website? The HWDSB website? Are they helpful to you?

9. Do you follow HWDSB or your school on social media?

10. What does the community need to know about your high school and HWDSB schools?

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 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 educational 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 four national awards programs that recognize individuals, districts and education agencies for excellence in communication.

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.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides school public relations/communication 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 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 4-day conference offers more than 70 topics and expert speakers on a wide array of school communication, public relations, marketing and engagement topics.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter, *eNetwork*, is a communication resource for all school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major communication issue and offers proven strategies educators can use to address it and other concerns. *PRincipal Communicator* is our monthly school-level print newsletter for school principals that provides practical communication tips to help build relationships between the school, the home and the community.

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

The NSPRA website at www.nspra.org offers a multitude of school communication resources on the public site and more comprehensive, in-depth information in our *Members Only* section, including resources and article archives.

The Flag of Learning and Liberty is a national education symbol developed by NSPRA in its 50th Anniversary Year. On July 4, 1985, the Flag of Learning and Liberty flew over the state houses of all 50 states to launch the rededication of America's commitment to education and a democratic, free society.

NSPRA is a member of the Learning First Alliance and the Universal Accreditation Board and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people.

Auditors' Vitae

Susan Hardy Brooks, APR

Susan Hardy Brooks, APR, vice president at Schnake Turnbo Frank | PR, has more than 30 years of experience in strategic communications planning, marketing, management, public relations and economic development. Susan is responsible for providing strategic public relations counsel to clients, leading account teams and business development. She has counseled leaders from the private, public and non-profit sectors on a range of public relations issues. Since joining STF | PR in 2010, she has led several strategic branding initiatives and the development of strategic marketing communications plans for clients in the private, public and non-profit sector.

After starting her company, HardyBrooks Public Relations, in 1998, Susan provided strategic communications counsel to more than 50 clients, including K-12 school districts, community colleges, universities, state education agencies and other organizations that support public education. She served as a solo practitioner for more than 10 years.

Susan also served as Communications Director for the Oklahoma State School Boards Association and provided strategic communications counsel for the Oklahoma Education Association. She worked with Oklahoma's Chief of Education Innovation and Strategy on the state's school reform efforts linked to the U.S. Department of Education's competitive *Race to the Top* grants. She served as marketing director for three career technology centers in Oklahoma, including Metro Tech, Canadian Valley Tech and Francis Tuttle. Susan served four years as Executive Director of The Citizens' Policy Center, a public policy research and education organization (think tank) dedicated to creating better opportunities for individuals and families. Support for public education is among the Center's top priorities.

In her years as a school public relations professional, she advocated for career tech, K-12 and higher education. While working as a school PR professional she managed 15 successful school bond/millage campaigns, created multiple school marketing campaigns that led to enrollment increases of 10-30 percent. She has presented public relations and marketing workshops in 25 states. Her strategies have been featured in *pr reporter*, NSPRA's *eNetwork* newsletter, *Techniques* magazine and several other national journals. She is a frequent presenter at state and national marketing conferences, and has received more than 100 awards for her marketing campaigns, publications, projects and events.

Susan has conducted many comprehensive communications audits across the U.S. and Canada for the National School Public Relations Association. She is accredited in public relations (APR) by the Universal Accreditation Board, She served as NSPRA President in 2015-16 and is a past NSPRA South Central Region Vice President.

Sylvia Link, MC, ABC, APR

Sylvia Link is a communications professional with over 25 years of experience and serves as a consultant with NSPRA's communication audit cadre.

She currently serves as Director of Marketing and Communication for Retired Teachers of Ontario/Les enseignantes et enseignants retraités de l'Ontario (RTO/ERO), Canada's largest non-profit organization for the retired education community. For five years prior to joining RTO/ERO, Sylvia directed communication and stakeholder outreach and engagement for child care and full-day kindergarten as Communications & Stakeholder Relations Manager for the Early Learning Division of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Previously, she served as Manager of Communications for Peel District School Board in Mississauga, Ontario, and developed strategies for communicating with 20,000 employees, 150,000 students, 232 schools and a culturally diverse community of 1.2 million people. Prior to joining the Peel District School Board, she served as a health care public relations professional in Toronto.

Sylvia is accredited in public relations under the Universal Accreditation Board. She is also the recipient of numerous professional awards from the International Association of Business Communicators, Apex, NSPRA, the Canadian Association of Communicators in Education and the Health Care Public Relations Association. Her awards include the NSPRA Gold Medallion and the Gold Quill Award of Excellence and Business Issue Award, the highest international IABC award. She also teaches Communications Management in the School Board Administration program at Guelph University.