



**Arlington
Public
Schools**

DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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Memorandum

To: Dr. Pat Murphy, Superintendent **Date:** December 20, 2017
From: Linda M. Erdos, Assistant Superintendent
Subject: Response to School and Community Relations Department Evaluation

We were pleased to receive and review the report from McGinn and Company with our recent department evaluation. Coincidentally, the report arrived at approximately the same time as the Baldrige Site Visit Feedback Report which allowed us to review both reports.

Background

A Communications Audit was previously conducted by the National School Public Relations for Arlington Public Schools (APS) in March 2006. While most of the recommendations at that time were implemented, the world of communications has drastically changed in the past decade. In addition, APS has grown by more than 10,000 students, and the current and projected growth has significantly changed the challenges and focus of communications.

In 2000 when I joined APS, the communications staff include seven (7) E/P-Scale staff (including my position) and two (2) G-scale staff. In 2017, the staff remains seven (7) E/P-Scale staff and one (1) G-Scale staff member. In addition to our core Public Relations/ Communications group, supervision of the Print Shop was moved from Financial Services to School and Community Relations in 2003, and supervision of AETV moved from the then Department of Instruction to School and Community Relations in the 2011-12 school year.

While the staffing level has remained the same, the addition of school liaison stipends for PR, Web and Volunteer liaisons has helped to expand our reach, support and integration of the communications activities with schools.

Strengths Cited in the Baldrige Report

We were extremely grateful to see that some of the highest scores from the Baldrige team came in the areas of Communications, Customer Relations and Customer Engagement.

Strengths cited by the team that SCR will review included:

- A well-deployed, integrated approach to listening to the voice of students and families.
- Multiple two-way communications include social media, APS School Talk, Peachjar, and targeted online content via FAQs and the “Engage with APS” subsite.
- Multiple systems, processes, structures and strategic personnel strategies exist to listen to the voices of students and families who speak more than 104 unique languages.

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- Outreach processes are in place to listen to the largest group of potential customers – the families of pre-school aged children.

Strengths Cited in the Baldrige Report

Across all interview, focus group discussions and review of the SCR team's work products, the McGinn evaluation concluded that while everyone recognizes the challenge of communicating with a diverse group of stakeholders on a wide variety of topics, it was evident that SCR provides strong support for APS through the high volume of communications managed by the department. Several strengths identified included:

- A talented and experienced team of communicators
- SCR is very responsive to requests for help
- Excellence in crisis mode support and media coaching
- An innovative liaison program
- High-quality print materials that are graphically appealing and feature clear messaging and branding
- A strong framework of communications policies and procedures in place

Recommendations from the Baldrige Report

The Baldrige team offered several recommendations that will be reviewed for future implementation, in collaboration with other departments and APS schools. These include:

- Developing a systematic and consolidated approach to receive, respond to and resolve customer complaints.
- Strengthening the APS system to determine customer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and engagement to produce actionable information.

Recommendations from the McGinn Report

Based on the evaluator's key findings, they provided a list of 12 recommendations for strengthening communications with APS stakeholders. It is important to note that the McGinn recommendations range from small items that can be quickly implemented, to larger more complex items.

The McGinn evaluators felt that because the SCR staff is already working at full capacity, larger items would most likely require additional resources through contract services, additional staff or other resources. Therefore, these recommendations need to be considered in the context of existing workload, budget and priorities.

Pages 3-8 provides a more detailed response to each of the 12 recommendations.

Conclusion

The School and Community Relations team recognizes the importance and need for continuous improvement, particularly in today's fast-changing world of communications. We are grateful for both of these outside reviews and recommendations and look forward to collaborating with colleagues throughout the school division to grow and enhance our work.

McGinn Report - Recommended Strategies**1) Continue to refine the planning process.**

This summer, SCR created the framework for a strategic communications plan (APS Strategic Communications Plan 2017-18 School Year). This plan should be further developed and refined until it becomes the guiding document for all SCR communication activities. We recommend including an overarching theme and broad key messages that reflect the direction and focus of the year's activities.

SCR Response:

- The Strategic Communications Plan has been compiled and is attached. Many tools listed in the Appendix are also used for ongoing planning.
- Key events and issues are already part of the department calendar.
- SCR will begin to share the plan schools, departments and school liaisons.
- The weekly Editorial Calendar includes themes, hashtags and key messages for the upcoming week.
- SCR will continue to build the annual plan based on the School Board Action Plan, CIP, and in support of other departmental projects

2) Improve communications around controversial issues.

SCR already anticipates upcoming controversial issues and creates a communications plan to address each one. To make these plans more useful and effective, they need to address issues early and thoroughly. The goal is to get out in front of the issue to stop the rumor mill from being the primary source of information.

SCR Response:

- This year, the 2017-18 Action Plan brochure was prepared to articulate the key action plan projects.
- One-page information sheets were also prepared for each topic.
- As needed, FAQs were developed as part of the Engage with APS process.
- The establishment of the new School Ambassadors network this year gave us an opportunity to share weekly messaging, updates and next steps with school staff and key community stakeholders.
- The new IQ constituent Management program will increase our ability to monitor and respond to stakeholder concerns.
- SCR will develop a Communications Training Plan for controversial issues
- As party of the Training Plan, SCR will focus on developing a "Train the Trainer" model for principals, teachers, staff, administrators and School Board leadership

3) Prioritize information going out so people really pay attention.

In the world we currently live in, most people are on information overload. Too many emails come into our work and home email boxes, and many people find it hard to keep up. This is particularly true for APS teachers, staff and families. Remember that you are trying to get the attention of people who are often working long days, commuting a far distance to and from work, and juggling the demands of family life. The best strategy that you can follow as a communicator is to remember that less is more.

SCR Response:

- The new APS School Talk vendor now allows SCR to more systematically target messaging. The addition of images also will help readers visually identify the category of information being provided.
- SCR will discuss modifying the use of staff voicemail with key leaders.

4) Better communicate the overall brand/mission of Arlington Public Schools.

As you are in the process of developing a new strategic plan, this is a good time to invest in creating a slogan and message platform for APS. A slogan offers a way to convey the district's overall purpose in a few words. It would be used in conjunction with the APS logo and be included on all communications from the division, as well as individual schools.

SCR Response:

- SCR will request funding to be used to develop a slogan and message platform this summer that reflects the mission, vision, core values and goals in the new APS Strategic Plan
- The slogan and message platform and logo/branding will be shared with all principals, administrators, and school liaisons for consistent use on district and school communications.
- SCR will work with the School Board Office to utilize these messaging tools in School Board communications

5) Better explain the Department of School and Community Relations and its capabilities.

SCR is doing a lot of great work with a set amount of resources. For those who work in other departments across the school division, this is difficult to understand and can lead to frustration. To address the demand for a faster response to time-sensitive issues and prioritizing incoming requests, we recommend implementing a formal intake process.

SCR Response:

- SCR will distribute a "Who to Call" list to school and department staff as well as to school liaisons to ensure staff knows about the support and resources available through the department.
- SCR will explore ways to utilize the new IQ Constituent Management system.
- SCR will work with a cross-departmental team to develop an intranet to support staff and help them access APS news, information and resources more readily.

6) Increase communication around the message that input from stakeholders is valued.

Stakeholders need to know that their input is welcome and valued and how to provide it at the right time in the right format.

SCR Response:

- SCR continues to work to refine and enhance the "Engage with APS" tool on the website, and every School Board or community meeting includes a reminder about the "Engage" resources.

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- A new “auto-reply” feature has now been developed for the “Contact Us” section on the “Engage with APS” site. The reply email thanks senders for their email, explains how the information will be used and outlines the “next steps” in the process.
 - All community meetings and presentations for “Engage” now end with a summary of how the information will be used and “next steps.”

7) Close the communication loop by asking stakeholders if they are getting the information they need when and how they need it.

SCR Response:

- SCR has periodically utilized the pop-up “feedback” link on the website and will explore using this more frequently.
- SCR is drafting questions for possible inclusion the next Community Satisfaction Survey, including those recommended by this report.

8) Continue to expand outreach to non-English speaking families.

Because Spanish-speaking parents make up the highest population of non-English speaking families in APS, two of the focus groups were conducted with Spanish-speaking parents. The feedback received from these groups was very specific about communication preferences.

SCR Response:

- The SCR Community Engagement Coordinator is currently working on developing an “Engage 101” for Spanish-speaking families that will focus on how to use mobile devices to stay connected with APS via the web, School Talk, and social media on APS issues.
- The SCR Community Engagement Coordinator now sends regular bi-weekly updates to over 800 community, civic and APS contacts to provide follow-up reminders.
- SCR is also collaborating with Teaching and Learning and Human Resources to expand translation services and support for APS as part of the FY 2019 Budget.

9) Involve teachers and other staff members earlier in the decision-making process and better utilize their frontline communication with students and parents.

It is important to utilize the vast network of 4,000 employees who are already communicating directly with students and families each day. Arm them with talking points and Q&As on important issues.

SCR Response:

- As noted in #5, SCR will work with a cross-departmental team to develop an intranet site to support staff and help them access APS news, information and resources more readily.

10) Help school liaisons be more efficient and effective.

The addition of PR, volunteer and web liaisons in the schools was a brilliant idea and one that has been successful in achieving a greater communications presence at every school. The largest challenge is the limited time liaisons have outside their primary jobs to devote to their duties. Therefore, it is important to make it as easy as possible for them.

SCR Response:

- This year, SCR has used the quarterly meetings to provide liaisons opportunities to share their expertise with colleagues. We will continue to showcase their “best practices” to share learning.
- SCR will also explore opportunities for “virtual” meetings to discuss opportunities and challenges with the liaisons.
- SCR will ask how the team can help liaisons in their role for the mid-year and end-of-year reviews.

11) When assessing resources, consider return on investment.

If the opportunity arises for additional staffing resources, we recommend adding a new liaison position in schools that could take on a high priority area like outreach to non-English speaking families. The school liaisons could report to one of the two communications coordinators currently not assigned to a liaison group.

SCR Response:

- Given the current financial forecasts, SCR does not believe that adding more resources is a viable option. Instead, we will explore developing stronger connections with the bilingual resource and ESOL/HILT assistants in the schools to facilitate stronger communications support with families.

12) Continue to refine and assess communications tools.

APS communications tools contain strong graphics and branding. For the most part, printed materials are attractive, easy to read, and include photos portraying a happy, diverse student population. Following are recommendations for specific activities:

SCR Response:

- SCR will review the recommendations and continue to explore opportunities to strengthen communications and enhance opportunities for engagement and feedback.

13) Provide School Board members with tools to support APS communications.

Because Board members are not working directly in the division’s day-to-day operations, strategies are needed to ensure they are armed with the information and tools they need to be most effective in their role and as they respond to their constituents.

SCR Response:

- SCR believes that several resources implemented in the past year (“Engage with APS” website, the new IQ Constituent Management system) have been established to provide the School Board members a central location for information related to communication about community deliberations.
- SCR staff will continue to be available through Weekly Meetings to provide responses and training and/or address upcoming needs for School Board members.
- SCR will invite the Deputy Clerk of the School Board to attend the weekly editorial meetings so that questions or communication needs can be better incorporated and

addressed in the weekly communication planning and message development work of the department.