



PUBLIC
RELATIONS LLC

Office of

COMMUNICATIONS

**Departmental Performance
Auditing Services**

Executive Summary



Report presented: January 9, 2020

// Introduction

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) is unique. In fact, when comparing ACPS to other school divisions in Virginia, there is not a single division that shares similar demographic characteristics. ACPS is also unique in the ways it celebrates and embraces its diversity. With over 119 languages spoken by students and families, the gift of a truly global population provides the ACPS learning community with opportunities unattainable in any other Virginia school division.

Given its location in the metro Washington, D.C., area, ACPS classrooms extend far beyond school walls. Established and emerging partnerships with universities and businesses further enrich the educational possibilities that are available to the division's nearly 16,000 students. And, the proximity of national and international news media provides ACPS with opportunities to tell its story to the United States and the world.

With a new Superintendent, a focused School Board and a City Council that last fiscal year fully funded the division's Operating Budget, it is the optimal moment to assess, improve and enhance the division's communications program.

// Scope

The audit team was directed to assess the Office of Communications in the following areas:

- Strategy Assessment (SA)
- Tools Assessment (TA)
- Effectiveness Assessment (EA)
- Compliance Assessment (CA)
- Impact Assessment (IA)

Many of our observations, kudos and recommendations cross over multiple areas of review; therefore, at the end of each element of our report, we list specific focus areas to demonstrate the audit team's efforts to meet the School Board's expected assessment.

Within the scope of the audit, the auditors gathered a great deal of primary and secondary research and assessed a significant number of collateral materials. Given the parameters of our assessment, there are elements of the division's communications program that were not reviewed by our team. Additionally, contacts with constituents were limited; however, we are confident that our interactions provided us with the information we needed for our work.

// Executive Summary

Observations

1. The Office of Communications is staffed by professionals who want ACPS to succeed. (EA)
2. The Office of Communications has a perception problem. (IA)
3. Barriers to collaboration – both within the department and between other departments and schools – have caused duplication of effort, miscommunication, errors and lost opportunities. (EA, IA)
4. The Superintendent is a skilled communicator with characteristics well suited to move ACPS's communications in a positive direction. (IA)
5. The School Board is invested in improving communications throughout the division and with each stakeholder group. (IA)

Kudos

1. The many national communications accolades earned by ACPS are indicative of the quality product that can be produced by the department. (TA)
2. The communications surrounding the new Superintendent announcement, First 100 Days and the Superintendent's Listening Tour were strategic and effective. (SA, TA, EA)
3. The "Measuring What Matters" initiative and resulting materials are effective in telling the story of ACPS beyond standardized testing. (SA, TA, EA)
4. Emergency communications, by almost all accounts, has improved within the division. (SA, TA)
5. ACPS branding is graphically sound and consistent throughout division materials. (TA)
6. The stories being told about students and staff are compelling and in alignment with the strategic goals of the division. (SA, EA, IA)
7. The ACPS Office of Communications Strategic Communications Plan is complete and follows industry standards. (SA, TA)
8. Primary communications materials, both print and digital, are consistently translated, specifically for Spanish, Amharic and Arabic-speaking families. (TA, EA, IA)
9. Data are routinely collected for the communications program's primary tools. (TA, EA)
10. Office of Communications staff take advantage of professional development opportunities and act as leaders in regional and national school public relations associations. (SA)

// Recommendations

Staffing & Organization

A pressure point for the Office of Communications is meeting the needs of a diverse school division with available staff. The reality of a school division's budget is that current staff must make the best of limited resources.

ACPS has market and demographic differences that support current staffing levels. However, current full-time employees (FTEs) are not being utilized in the most effective manner. A review of the department's organization and job responsibilities has resulted in the following recommendations.

1. Conduct a time study of members of the Office of Communications team, including the Director of Communications. (EA)
2. Develop a job description for an assistant director/senior communications coordinator who can act as a deputy for the Director of Communications. This position could be developed and staffed within current FTE allocations. (EA)
3. Increase the .5 communications specialist writing position to full time. (EA)
4. Move receptionist duties from the Office of Communications administrative assistant. Develop a structured phone tree and integrate calls into a customer response system. (EA)
5. Combine the Office of Communications and the Office of School, Business and Community Partnerships into an Office of Communications and Engagement, maintaining two director positions and reporting to one senior division leader. (SA, EA)

// Recommendations

Emergency Communications

As noted in the Kudos section, emergency communications in ACPS has improved. The following recommendations will continue that upward trajectory and further strengthen the division's communications in crisis situations.

1. Ensure the participation of Office of Communications staff in all major emergency initiative launches or changes. (SA, EA)
2. Continue to strengthen existing relationships with emergency responders and develop an emergency management communication plan with Alexandria City Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities. (TA, EA)
3. Develop and consistently follow a debrief protocol after each major emergency. Expand the debrief protocol to learn from major school-based emergencies in other localities/states. (TA, EA)
4. Cross-train all Office of Communications staff on all elements of the division's emergency communications protocols and develop an on-call calendar to identify one staff member each weekend who will assist as needed with communications emergencies. (TA, EA)
5. Develop and implement a protocol to ensure that the School Board and all division leaders are aware of emergency events and have the information they need to inform relevant stakeholders. (TA, EA, IA)

// Recommendations

Collaboration & Opportunity

Strategic communication involves much more than identifying goals and objectives and then developing a communications plan. Strategic communication involves building trust, strengthening relationships, and enhancing the capacity to tell a story that garners community support. The ACPS communications program is strategic in many ways, but there are opportunities to turn an established program into an exemplary one (*see NSPRA Rubric of Practice and Suggested Measures, Appendix I*).

1. Develop processes to strengthen collaboration and ensure the Office of Communications' role in launching and implementing all major division initiatives. (SA, EA, IA)
2. Design and implement a communications skill development plan for School Board members, division leaders, and school and Central Office staff. (SA, EA, TA, IA)
3. Develop and launch a customer service portal and integrate a complaints process into the portal. (TA, EA, IA)
4. Strengthen existing connection efforts and develop programs to reach untapped constituencies. (EA, IA)
 - Utilize School Board connections to further spread division messages among stakeholder groups.
 - Develop a real estate professional outreach program.
 - Regularly attend meetings of city and local communications professionals.
5. Assign Office of Communications staff to schools of responsibility ('beats') within the division. (EA, IA)

// Recommendations

Process & Tools

The Office of Communications has a multitude of tools available for sharing the story of ACPS. Department staff members possess high-level skills, and the following recommendations are designed to help staff use these communication methods to the most effect.

1. Identify and implement a project management tool to improve processes and track requests for Office of Communications support. (EA, IA)
2. Redesign and relaunch the division website. (TA, EA, IA, CA)
3. Identify funding to expand availability of closed captioning services. (EA, TA, CA)
4. Expand existing staff communications initiatives and develop new internal channels. (TA, EA, IA)
 - Launch and maintain an Intranet.
 - Celebrate staff.
5. Move T.C. Williams Audio Visual (A/V) responsibilities to the T.C. Williams administration and all other A/V support responsibilities to another department, specifically one with technical staff that can immediately meet division and school support needs. (EA, IA)

// Recommendations

Best Foot Forward

ACPS is a high-quality, diverse school division with points of pride that should be clearly and consistently shared with both internal and external stakeholders. Alexandria City citizens without students in ACPS are generally not aware of the many opportunities available to students and the stellar education that is provided within their community. And, some connected stakeholders are stymied by communication that is either difficult to understand or is not disseminated through preferred communications channels.

As noted in the 2014 Community Engagement Ad Hoc Committee report, there are two primary audiences for division communications: 'intense information seekers' and those who 'occasionally seek specific information'. For both audiences, it is essential that the division strive to always put its best foot forward.

1. Develop and disseminate communications that are grammatically correct and free of content errors. (SA, TA, EA, IA)
2. Focus efforts and cease low-impact and ineffective communications initiatives. (SA, TA, EA)
3. Embrace the 'Bite, Snack, Meal' concept when constructing division communications. (SA, TA, EA)
4. Proactively nurture relationships with news media outlets and take advantage of opportunities. (TA, EA)
5. Ensure events are planned well in advance and meet division standards. (SA, TA, IA)

// Conclusion

BetsyOS PR LLC was contracted to assess the work of the Office of Communications; however, without a doubt, communication is everyone's responsibility. Further, effective communication within any school division is accomplished only if all parties are engaged and are mutually focused on a shared outcome.

As a result, it was rewarding to speak with School Board members, division leaders, members of the communications department team, staff, families and students in Alexandria City Public Schools because all – even if they had concerns with communications – were steadfast in their support of ACPS. All wanted the community's schools to be the best they could be and all wanted to help students reach their highest potential.

We believe that the core structure of the department is capable of meeting the needs of this unique community. It is with this in mind that we conclude that the ACPS Office of Communications will continue to improve with the implementation of our recommendations and with the ongoing support of internal and external stakeholders.