



PUBLIC  
RELATIONS LLC

Office of

# COMMUNICATIONS

**Departmental Performance  
Auditing Services**

***Report***



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Report presented: January 9, 2020

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# // 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 Washington, D.C., metro 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.

# // Data Collection

With the assistance of ACPS staff, the audit team conducted primary research in all audit assessment areas, as detailed below. We detail the number of constituents involved by parenthetical notation.

## Interviews

Director of Communications  
Office of Communications Staff (8)  
School Board Members (9)  
Superintendent  
Senior Leadership Team (9)  
T.C. Williams Principal  
Family & Community Engagement Staff (2)  
Facilities/Operations Staff (4)  
Director of Pupil Transportation  
Director of Safety and Security Services  
Alexandria City Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities Division Chief  
Alexandria City Senior Communications Officer (former)

## Focus Groups

ACPS Partners & Volunteers (6)  
Amharic-Speaking Parents (12)  
Arabic-Speaking Parents (5)  
Principals/Assistant Principals (5)  
Middle School Students (12)  
EAA/T.C. Williams Licensed Staff (5)  
English-Speaking Parents (6)  
Former School Board Members (5)  
Advisory Committee Chairs, PTAC, Boosters, Parents (8)  
Spanish-Speaking Parents (2)  
Principals (3)  
High School Students (9)  
Central Office Support Staff (17)  
Central Office Administrators (5)  
School Support Staff (4)

## Surveys

73 Total

- Support Staff/Administrators
- Parents (including 10 Spanish-Speaking Parents)
- Community Representatives
- Licensed Staff

# // Data Collection

Additionally, the audit team reviewed secondary research compiled for other reports or initiatives. This included:

- Risk Assessment Report (2013)
- Community Engagement Ad Hoc Committee Report (2014)
- Student Achievement Advisory Committee Workgroup Report: Parent & Community Engagement (2012-13)
- ACPS 2020 Surveys (2016, 2017, 2018)
- 2025 Strategic Planning Committee Data Workbook (2019)
- Family & Community Engagement (FACE) Department Vision, Goals, Family Toolkit, and other materials (The 2019 Family Engagement Initiative findings were not released to the public prior to this report.)

## National Benchmarking

The audit team utilized the National School Public Relations Association Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures (© 2018) to assess the Office of Communications in the following areas:

- Comprehensive Planned Communications
- Internal Communications
- Parent/Family Communications
- Marketing/Branding Communications
- Crisis Communications

This measuring tool provides an opportunity to assess the critical function areas of a comprehensive communications program in comparison with the best practices of top performers in the profession. Appendix I details the result of this benchmarking effort.

## Materials

The Office of Communications uploaded over 400 documents and links to a shared repository. These documents included printed materials, plans, data, reports, and links to videos and digital content. Over the course of the audit, the department continued to update the repository and shared their work as it was developed. Hard copies of specific collateral materials were also provided to the audit team.

Additionally, the audit team conducted a limited usability study of the division's website to assess the tool and its effectiveness.

# // Observations

**1. The Office of Communications is staffed by professionals who want ACPS to succeed. (EA)**

It is clear that the department is staffed by experienced and talented professionals. It is also clear that members of the department’s team strive to do their best for the betterment of ACPS. In interviews, staff members strongly noted their commitment to ACPS and their dedication to improving the perception and reputation of the department.

**2. The Office of Communications has a perception problem. (IA)**

Office of Communications staff members stated it best when they noted that regardless of giving their best effort, they are told that it is difficult to work with their department. Several staff members within the organization stated that they have given up on improving collaboration. “It’s easier just to do it myself,” one department leader stated.

**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)**

Duplication of effort indicates that resources are not utilized in the most effective manner. Lost opportunities affect the division’s reputation, and, more importantly, do not give students, staff and families a true picture of the many great things happening in ACPS.

**4. The Superintendent is a skilled communicator with characteristics well suited to move ACPS’s communications in a positive direction. (IA)**

The reality is that not all Superintendents are natural communicators. Dr. Hutchings is engaging, possesses characteristics that engender trust, and he has shared a vision for ACPS that emphasizes collaboration.

**5. The School Board is invested in improving communications throughout the division and with each stakeholder group. (IA)**

In their interviews, it was very evident that each School Board member is committed to the division’s communications efforts and is willing and able to provide leadership to improve the overall communications program. Without this support, none of the following recommended actions will be possible.

# // Kudos

- 1. The many national communications accolades earned by ACPS are indicative of the quality product that can be produced by the department. (TA)**

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) Gold Medallion Award (2019) for the “Reinventing the Titans” campaign recognized a comprehensive communications effort that resulted in significant positive attention for ACPS. This is the highest award that a school public relations department can win, and ACPS’s selection for the award is just one example of their multiple recognitions for award-winning work.

- 2. The communications surrounding the new Superintendent announcement, First 100 Days and the Superintendent’s Listening Tour were strategic and effective. (SA, TA, EA)**

The introduction and first days of a new Superintendent’s tenure often determine the Superintendent’s future success. The communications plan developed for this integral time in ACPS utilized all available tools and provided the Superintendent with the opportunities he needed to begin to build relationships with division stakeholders.

- 3. The “Measuring What Matters” initiative and resulting materials are effective in telling the story of ACPS beyond standardized testing. (SA, TA, EA)**

In a school division with a very diverse and vibrant student population, the quality of the instructional program and the education delivered to students goes far beyond scores on standardized tests. This communications effort has been very well received by internal and external audiences and states a compelling case for ACPS.

- 4. Emergency communications, by almost all accounts, has improved within the division. (SA, TA)**

While the audit team has recommendations to further enhance emergency communications, this improvement was noted several times in interviews and focus groups. Keeping students safe and secure is a primary responsibility of the division, and clear, timely communications in the event of an emergency are of paramount importance.

- 5. ACPS branding is graphically sound and consistent throughout division materials. (TA)**

Branding is an important element of a school division’s communications program, and ACPS fully demonstrates how an effective brand can strengthen an organization’s messaging. There is never any doubt of the origin of ACPS materials due to the division’s branding efforts.

# // Kudos

**6. The stories being told about students and staff are compelling and in alignment with the strategic goals of the division. (SA, EA, IA)**

The stories told through ACPS Express, video and the VOICES podcast celebrate accomplishment, embrace diversity and provide the community with great examples of the success possible in ACPS schools.

**7. The ACPS Office of Communications Strategic Communications Plan is complete and follows industry standards. (SA, TA)**

Updated biennially, the plan provides a high-level overview of the department's goals, objectives, tools, tactics and measures. The plan includes specific data points to support initiatives and details areas of improvement. It provides a full picture of communications efforts in the division.

**8. Primary communications materials, both print and digital, are consistently translated, specifically for Spanish, Amharic and Arabic-speaking families. (TA, EA, IA)**

With over 119 languages spoken by ACPS families and students, translations are vital to the success of routine and crisis communications and to the successful engagement of families. This is a significant strength, and the division's efforts to translate additional documents and expand the number of languages that are regularly available should be commended.

**9. Data are routinely collected for the communications program's primary tools. (TA, EA)**

Analytics help tell division staff whether their communications efforts are effective. Social media, video, news media and survey data are areas where the department has focused their attention and resources.

**10. Office of Communications staff take advantage of professional development opportunities and act as leaders in regional and national school public relations associations. (SA)**

The Director of Communications recently earned her professional accreditation and one of the department's communications specialists has served as an officer in the regional association for a number of years. Additionally, department staff have presented at industry conferences and led webinars on communicating with diverse audiences.



# // Recommendations: Staffing & Organization

A pressure point for the Office of Communications is meeting the needs of a diverse 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)

The Director of Communications dedicates a significant portion of each workday in support of division leadership. This is an integral role; however, a time study will determine if there are certain aspects of this support that could be assigned to other staff, thereby freeing the Director of Communications to meet Office of Communications responsibilities.

The constant generation new ideas and projects hampers the fulfillment of ongoing and previously assigned initiatives and can affect the division's ability to strategically communicate its messages. In addition, staff spend significant time redoing or substantially revising communications materials. While this may be required occasionally, miscommunication and a lack of process has created an environment where this occurs regularly. A detailed self-study, with specific information about time spent on each project, will assist in determining interdepartmental areas for improvement.

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will research best practices around conducting a staff time study, conduct that study for all members of staff and analyze those results with a view to reviewing the amount of time spent on each responsibility assigned to staff. **Projected Implementation Date: February 2020**

Staff will also document the process used in the back and forth of writing/editing content with a view to understanding the interdepartmental roles and responsibilities for writing/editing/reviewing/finalizing content. **Projected Implementation Date: February 2020**

## 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)

The funnel effect of all requests going through the Director of Communications has resulted in frustrations and delays. This position would serve as the department's 'air traffic controller' and would work to implement and assess systems recommended in this audit (e.g., project management and customer response systems). Additionally, this position should act as a point person for T.C. Williams communications (see *Collaboration & Opportunity Recommendations 3 & 5; Process & Tools Recommendation 1*).

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will research job descriptions for the Assistant Director position, develop a job description that includes being

# // Recommendations: Staffing & Organization

*a point person for communication coordination at T.C. Williams High School in collaboration with HR. This position can be created in July 2020 through the realignment of the position of TV Manager or will need to wait until July 2021 to be created if funding cannot be found within the current position allocation. Projected Implementation Date: July 2020 or July 2021*

### 3. Increase the .5 communications specialist writing position to full time. (EA)

The storytelling efforts of the department have significantly improved and support the goal of building a new narrative to contradict outdated perceptions of the division. This increase to full time is necessary to ensure support of print, digital and video initiatives. Implementation of this recommendation would also provide additional editing capacity to reduce/eliminate errors that damage the division and negatively impact the department's reputation.

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation and fully supports pursuing this as an option. The Office of Communications will work with the HR department and Chief Financial Officer to put back the 0.5 communications specialist (writer) FTE that was removed in July 2019 to make room to fund communication support for facilities projects. This 0.5 FTE will be restored from the 0.5 FTE that was pulled from this role in July 2019 to support facilities projects. Increasing the support for this role will reduce errors and increase the bandwidth for Office of Communications editing support. The readdition of this 0.5 FTE will require the Office of Communications to request funding for CIP facilities support from Operations/Facilities. This has not yet been guaranteed for July 2020. CIP projects have been identified as a high-need area for communications support. Projected Implementation Date: July 2020

### 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)

Customer service is negatively impacted by the current routing process for phone calls into the Central Office. The majority of the calls relate to human resources, student services, records and transportation, and between 10-50 percent of the Office of Communications administrative assistant's time is dedicated to responding to and routing these telephone calls. The recaptured capacity of this position would provide additional development, website and editing support (see *Collaboration & Opportunity Recommendation 3*).

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will work with the superintendent, SLT, and Chief Financial Officer to find a way to move the division-wide receptionist duties from the Office of Communications administrative assistant to a division-wide receptionist position, providing more editing, website, event support. Projected Implementation Date: July 2020

The Office of Communications will also work with Technology Services and all other offices to develop a structured phone tree and integrate calls into a customer response system. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020

# // Recommendations: Staffing & Organization

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)**

A lack of collaboration between these two departments results in uncertainty, miscommunication and duplication of effort. Combining the departments into one would ensure collaboration and streamline requests for support from each department. Additionally, translation services should be moved under this umbrella.

Each director position should be maintained, and it is imperative that each director continue to be part of the Superintendent's Senior Leadership Team.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will work with the superintendent to fulfill both his reorganization and the recommendations of this audit to combine and increase collaboration with the Office of School, Business and Community Partnerships. As a team, we believe this structure is designed for the future success of both offices. Projected Implementation Date: July 2020*

# // 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)**

The launch of the ALICE emergency protocol was ineffective and confusing to internal and external stakeholders. The consistent involvement of Office of Communications staff will positively affect any emergency protocol or initiative launch and will help ensure that clarity is provided to those whose lives may depend on how these programs are implemented.

***Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications agrees that proactive communication planning can contribute to the success of any initiative. The office will work with the superintendent and superintendent's leadership team to develop standards to ensure that every new initiative has a shared written communication plan developed by all involved parties before any actions are taken to move forward. Projected Implementation Date: February 2020*

**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)**

Interactions between division communications staff and responders in times of emergency appear to have improved; however, consistent and regular communication will ensure that each entity is aware of the most up-to-date information regarding staffing, protocols and procedures.

Given the shared use of ACPS facilities and staff, the fact that ACPS families take advantage of multiple recreation programs, and that crisis situations affect both entities' programs, a detailed plan will enhance emergency response communications efforts. This plan should incorporate if/then protocols for the range of possible events (e.g., weather, power interruptions, police actions, in-school emergencies, etc.) and determine communications responsibilities for each.

The plan should be reviewed after each major event and revised as needed and, at a minimum, annually.

***Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will develop a communication plan to continue to develop and strengthen connections with city emergency officials. This plan will include collaboration with the ACPS Office of Safety and Security to ensure the Office of Communications is invited to and participates in shared drills across the city. It will also include collaboration with the ACPS Director of Policy and Board Initiatives to expand the language in ACPS regulations on emergency closings to formalize the way individual situations that involve the closure of schools are handled with the RPCA. This is currently handled on an ad-hoc basis and can lead to misunderstandings between ACPS and the City. See the job description for the Chief of School and Community Relations. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

# // Recommendations: Emergency Communications

## 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)**

As difficult as each crisis can be, each provides an opportunity to learn and improve future crisis communications. These debriefs should follow a formal protocol and involve all affected constituencies. To expand the reach of each debrief, a report should be developed and shared with division leadership. Additionally, if the debrief reveals gaps and/or opportunities for improving existing procedures, those changes should be made and immediately disseminated.

***Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. Although the Office of Communications conducts debriefs with a limited number of staff following an emergency, not all parties are always invited and there is no written protocol for the debriefing session. The Office of Communications will develop a process for conducting debriefing that can be documented for future internal audit and evaluation purposes in line with this recommendation. Projected Implementation Date: March 2020*

## 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)**

Emergencies do not occur on a set calendar within a Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. window. Ensuring that staff are cross trained will allow the development of an on-call calendar but also will significantly enhance the division's communications efforts in the event of a large-scale emergency.

***Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will enhance cross-training of all communications staff on all emergency procedures and develop an on-call roster to cover weekend emergencies. See the job description for the Chief of School and Community Relations. Projected Implementation Date: February 2020*

## 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)**

Trust and confidence lost due to poor or incomplete communication can last for decades and is very difficult to earn back. It is imperative that the School Board and division leadership are not only kept in the loop in a timely manner, but that they are also given the tools that they need to share information with their constituencies.

School Board members and division leaders should be provided regular opportunities for crisis communications training where process, messaging and hands-on experiences are provided. In the event of an emergency, all communications disseminated by the division should be provided to School Board and division leaders immediately prior to distribution. Additionally, where appropriate, talking points should be developed to provide these division leaders with relevant facts and messages.

***Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will develop crisis communications training for the School Board to provide them with training on messaging and hands-on experiences in an emergency. The Office of Communications will work with the superintendent to ensure the Board is informed and supported regarding emergencies. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

# // 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)

Efforts must be made to repair relationships between members of leadership and to focus on the division's future communications needs. While several division leaders stated that they needed a communications staff member within their departments, this move would not strengthen strategic communications and would make the issue of departmental silos an even greater impediment to effective communications.

When Office of Communications staff are involved from the beginning of initiatives there is a greater likelihood of a project's success (e.g., Superintendent's First 100 Days). A lack of division-wide departmental collaboration and coordination has negatively affected the information flow and the perception of projects (e.g., major facilities).

The Superintendent should implement a protocol requiring division leaders to involve Office of Communications staff in the launch of any major division initiative. The topic of communications should be added to the weekly Senior Leadership Team meeting agenda, the monthly Principals' Meeting agenda and to summer professional development agendas. These opportunities must be planned and purposeful uses of precious meeting time and should be discussed prior to each meeting as to content, goals and objectives.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications agrees that proactive communication planning can contribute to the success of any initiative. The office will work with the superintendent and superintendent's leadership team to develop standards to ensure that every new initiative has a shared written communication plan developed by all involved parties before any actions are taken; the topic of communication is added to the agenda of the weekly SLT meetings; and communication plans for each major initiative are circulated at the meeting for input and feedback. Projected Implementation Date: July 2020*

## 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)

In alignment with the above recommendation, understanding the strategic objectives of the division's communications program and providing leaders with the tools and skills needed to contribute to meeting those objectives can be accomplished through a development program spearheaded by the Office of Communications.

# // Recommendations: Collaboration & Opportunity

While leaders would be the primary audience for this initiative, school and Central Office staff would also benefit from and appreciate regular opportunities to learn more about the division's communications efforts. Additionally, including these staff members would enhance messaging, extend reach into multiple stakeholder groups and encourage shared ownership of the division's communications goals and objectives. Training topics could include:

- Media training
- Messaging around ACPS 2020-25
- Use of and pitfalls of digital communications tools
- Crisis communications
- Event management best practices
- Customer service
- Cultural awareness

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will develop a communications skill plan and training for CO staff, school leadership, the School Board and division leadership. This will include training on the division's communications program, goals, media and social media, messaging, the ACPS 2025 Strategic Plan, crisis communications, event management, customer service and cultural awareness. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

### 3. Develop and launch a customer service portal and integrate a complaints process into the portal. (TA, EA, IA)

With the city's launch of their new 311 customer response system, the division should explore opportunities to either partner with the city or to identify and launch a similar system for school-specific inquiries, comments and complaints.

Many of the respondents to our research and to previously conducted research say they are dissatisfied with the accessibility and responses of division staff to inquiries, comments and complaints. Launching a system to track these interactions will assist the division in identifying areas of needed growth and address those deficiencies through training and/or staffing. There are several products on the market, including several specifically designed to meet the needs of school divisions, and all would enhance the division's minimal efforts in this area.

The recent development and communication of a standardized guide to navigating the division for concerns, inquiries and suggestions is a step in the right direction. However, this protocol will not give the division the level of detail and accuracy that an automated system can provide.

**Management's Response:** Management supports the recommendation and is supportive of ACPS' adoption of the Salesforce online tracking system, but is aware that this kind of system will require additional budget to staff at a communications specialist level to implement successfully. The Office of Communications will work with the superintendent, Chief Financial Officer and Chief of Staff to ensure the required supports are in place to ensure successful implementation of any online system. **Projected Implementation Date: July 2021**

# // Recommendations: Collaboration & Opportunity

## 4. Strengthen existing connection efforts and develop programs to reach untapped constituencies. (EA, IA)

It is vital that the division enhance its efforts to connect with members of the Alexandria City community. There are several ways to attain this goal:

**Utilize School Board connections to further spread division messages among stakeholder groups.** Create and maintain a packet of materials, presentations and talking points on topics of importance to the division (e.g., facilities, budget, achievement, equity) for School Board members to use, as needed, when meeting with community groups and constituents. This packet must be regularly updated as the School Board moves through the decision-making process on major initiatives, and every effort should be made to ensure that materials developed prior to a School Board vote detail options in an unbiased manner.

**Develop a real estate professional outreach program.** While there are materials available to any real estate professional who inquires, a planned program with regular opportunities for interactions with division staff and visits to division schools will assist real estate professionals when they are meeting with perspective Alexandria City residents.

**Regularly attend meetings of city and local communications professionals.** In Alexandria City, there is a regular meeting of communications staff from city departments, non-profits and other community-based organizations, and every effort should be made for at least one member of the Office of Communications staff to attend these meetings. For a minimal time investment, relationships could be improved, information could be shared and connections could be developed.

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will collaborate with the superintendent and Office of the School Board to collate regularly updated talking points and cheat sheets for use by School Board members. **Projected Implementation Date: March 2020**

The Office of Communications will develop a more expansive real estate outreach program and materials that can be shared regularly to keep real estate agents informed of key facts. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

The Office of Communications will ensure attendance at citywide communicators meetings. **Projected Implementation Date: March 2020**

## 5. Assign Office of Communications staff to schools of responsibility ('beats') within the division. (EA, IA)

During the course of our research, we identified or were made aware of opportunities that were lost or not taken advantage of to the division's benefit. It is apparent that some of these lost opportunities were due to the unavailability of communications staff. Given the significant job responsibilities of a limited number of staff, one way to address this issue, and to potentially provide better customer service, is to utilize a beat system, similar to the way media cover a community's news. Not only will a beat system help strengthen relationships, it also will add a new level of accountability and coordination between the department and division schools.



# // Recommendations: Collaboration & Opportunity

Given the size of the division's only high school, one Office of Communications staff member should be assigned to T.C. Williams and act as the primary point of contact for all Office of Communications support of the school. The division's other schools should be divided among Office of Communications staff based on size and support needs.

Implementing this system will require cross-training of department staff and coordination of available resources. It will also be imperative that each assigned staff member work diligently to ensure school-based Office of Communications requests align with the division's overall communications program's goals and objectives.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications agrees that with the present framework of the departmental structure, a very limited number of staff have significant job requirements and it is impossible to take advantage of every opportunity. Once the Office of Communications and the Office of School, Business and Community Partnerships are brought under one umbrella, the Office of Communications will work with the FACE Center to identify expanded collaboration opportunities and develop a framework for taking advantage of opportunities. While the team agrees that it makes sense for schools to have a point person within the Office of Communications, it would need to be assessed whether beat assignments would make sense given the wide variety of different/specialized skill sets within the team. Projected Implementation Date: December 2020*

# // 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 communications 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)

The majority of staff members within the Office of Communications requested the identification and implementation of a strategic project management tool to assist staff members with workflow, enhance communication within the department, and improve customer service. To be effective, this tool would need to be utilized by all ACPS staff who make requests for support from the department, especially division and departmental leadership. A project management platform will provide a structure for tracking requests by both the department and requestors and will help streamline the support process. Prioritization of projects can also be accomplished with this tool and will provide the department with data to ensure a focus on high-value/high-impact requests.

There are a number of products (e.g., Asana, Slack, Basecamp, etc.) on the market that provide platforms for these needs, and each should be explored to determine which will be the most effective in meeting department and support requirements. To begin tracking requests immediately, the department could use something as simple as a Google Form, accessible online to division staff.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications will develop a priority ticketing system that also aligns requests with ACPS Areas of Focus. This will help manage the vast number of requests that come in on a daily basis and fulfillment of them in a timely and consistent way. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

## 2. Redesign and relaunch the division website. (TA, EA, IA, CA)

A number of stakeholders, internal and external, noted the usability of the website as an area of needed improvement. The summer 2019 hire of a full-time communications specialist with the website as a primary area of responsibility has and will continue to enhance the functionality of the current site. However, the design of the website needs a significant overhaul and potentially a new platform provider.

The site currently meets accessibility standards, and accessibility is a consistent focus of department staff. This focus must be maintained especially if it is determined that a new vendor will provide website platform services.

Certain components should be incorporated into the design of the current and future website:

- A dynamic “New to ACPS” micro-site
- A myth-buster micro-site to provide accurate and updated information on rumors or misinformation that affect reputation and trust

# // Recommendations: Process & Tools

- A photo directory of division and school-based staff placed appropriately throughout the site that includes contact information
- Initiative-specific micro-sites (e.g., ACPS 2025, Equity, Facilities, etc.)
- An expanded and interactive data dashboard

To ensure that school websites are updated and utilized by schools to their best effect, a stipend should be allocated for school-based website editors. Attaching a stipend to this work should correspond with the development of an evaluation process similar to the process in place for school liaisons tasked with school social media posts.

A training program should be developed to correspond with the site redesign/relaunch. School web editors should be required to attend each session, and at least one staff member in each major division department should be trained on the website tools. The training program should go beyond the technical steps of posting and should include messaging tips and ways to successfully enhance a school's/department's reputation through digital communication.

**Management's Response:** Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications fully supports this recommendation and agrees that, although the team have been able to work with the platform to meet accessibility standards, the current platform provider needs a reassessment in light of usability. The Office of Communications began discussions with Technology Services in November 2019 around an initial RFI around the mobile app, website and emergency messaging platforms that are currently provided by the same platform provider. **Projected Implementation Date: March 2021**

The Office of Communications will work with the superintendent and Chief Financial Officer to assess the feasibility and cost of expanding the highly successful Social Media Liaison Program (formerly School PR Liaison Program) to include web editors. While some schools already include this as part of the current stipend, it is not uniform across the division and would add a layer of accountability to web updates. **Projected Implementation Date: July 2020**

### 3. Identify funding to expand availability of closed captioning services. (EA, TA, CA)

Funding for closed captioning services should be consolidated. Closed captioning is required for all videos created by any staff member and by students wishing to post videos on division communications vehicles.

To ensure compliance, training should be provided to all who produce videos in the division, and a process should be developed to ensure direct access to available funds by the appropriate staff members, including the T.C. Williams TV Production teacher. A written protocol should be developed and disseminated, and all closed captioning jobs should be tracked through an online platform.

**Management's Response:** Management supports the recommendation and will need to work with the superintendent and Chief Financial Officer to assess the feasibility and cost of expanding this service to all student-produced content. **Projected Implementation Date: July 2020 or July 2021 dependent upon funding**

# // Recommendations: Process & Tools

## 4. Expand existing staff communications initiatives and develop new internal channels. (TA, EA, IA)

Staff who were interviewed or who participated in audit focus groups are eager to play their roles in ensuring the success of ACPS. Many, however, stated that they did not have the information they thought they needed nor did they have opportunities to strengthen internal relationships. Additionally, many said they appreciated receiving “Insider” and that it provided quality information; however, they also stated that they wanted more than an emailed newsletter.

Recommended initiatives to enhance internal communications include:

**Launch and maintain an Intranet.** The division’s external website should not be used to communicate staff-specific information, and staff members do not believe Canvas provides the tools or level of functionality that they desire. An Intranet acts as an internal bulletin board, information repository and messaging vehicle. It also provides additional opportunities to celebrate success, strengthen awareness of division initiatives and gather feedback from staff members.

**Celebrate staff.** The partnership between the Office of Communications and the Office of Human Resources should be further cultivated to better communicate employee recognition programs and develop new programs to give credit and attention to staff members whose daily efforts make ACPS a success.

**Management’s Response:** Management supports the recommendation and will need to work with Technology Services to consider the purchase of an intranet for staff support in place of Canvas. The Office of Communications agrees that staff need to be able to access two-way communication platforms to post and answer questions and that expanded internal communications including a bulletin board would be beneficial to the division and provide a way to celebrate staff on a more regular basis. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2021**

## 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 requirements. (EA, IA)

Communications department staff involvement in coordinating T.C. Williams’ significant A/V needs creates an unnecessary barrier and negatively impacts multi-media opportunities at the school. To manage these requests, an events coordinator/auditorium manager position for T.C. Williams, reporting directly to the T.C. Williams Principal, should be created. This position could be developed within existing FTEs or could be developed as a stipend position.

It is imperative that an inventory of all current A/V equipment and a review of T.C. Williams’ future A/V needs takes place. During this inventory, efforts should be made to ensure all equipment meets safety and frequency standards. As a result of this review, future operator/contractor fees and equipment purchases can be included in future operating budgets.

Shifting A/V support to another department will provide the FTE needed for an Office of Communications assistant director/senior communications coordinator.

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# // Recommendations: Process & Tools

**Management's Response:** Management supports the recommendation to move the delivery of A/V services for drama, concerts and presentations at T.C. Williams out of the Office of Communications and will develop a plan in collaboration with the superintendent and Technology Services to explore alternative ways to deliver A/V services. **Projected Implementation Date: July 2020**

Internal audits of equipment are carried out every two years. The last audit was in summer 2018. A full audit of ACPS equipment will be carried out in summer 2020. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

# // 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)

A school division is held to a justifiably high standard when communicating with audiences. A reactive culture where everything is perceived as an emergency has a deleterious effect on the quality and accuracy of communications. Implementation of recommended initiatives will assist the division in its internal culture, and the following steps will improve communications and provide needed time for review and editing.

- **Shift e-newsletter distributions (Insider and Express) away from Monday morning and later into the work week.**
- **Alternate e-newsletter content to focus on need-to-know information one week and feature stories the next.**
- **Develop a communications calendar to plan for yearly communications requests/needs and to ensure sufficient time is provided for review by subject-area experts.**
- **Take advantage of opportunities for professional development in writing and editing.**

**Management’s Response:** Management agrees with the overall recommendation and will review the timing of delivery of ACPS Express and ACPS Insider to ensure it continues to make sense. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

The Office of Communications strongly supports developing processes for delivery of materials and this will align with the implementation of a ticketing system for requests. These requests can be automatically added to a communications requests delivery calendar for the year. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

The Office of Communications strongly supports professional development and will develop a timeline for staff to take advantage of professional writing/editing workshops. **Projected Implementation Date: September 2020**

The Office of Communications will also review the recommendation around splitting features and news stories to assess whether this would align with our media plan for strengthening coverage of our key messaging and the weekly communication needs of the division. **Projected Implementation Date: March 2020**

# // Recommendations: Best Foot Forward

## 2. Focus efforts and cease low-impact and ineffective communications initiatives. (SA, TA, EA)

To assess the preferences of a greater percentage of stakeholders, a communications-specific survey should be developed and administered every other year. This will provide structured feedback from internal and external audiences and will enable staff to allocate their limited time using data-driven decision making processes.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The implementation of a ticketing system by the Office of Communications with a priorities check list aligned with ACPS Focus Areas will ensure that efforts are focused on high-impact priority areas. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

*The Office of Communications strongly embraces the opportunity to develop and administer a communications-specific survey to provide data to better inform staff about communication needs. Projected Implementation Date: June 2020*

## 3. Embrace the 'Bite, Snack, Meal' concept when constructing division communications. (SA, TA, EA)

Different audiences have different information preferences and needs. Many audiences want a little bit of information about a lot of things – a 'bite'. Others, because the information either directly affects them or is an area of interest, will want a little more detail – a 'snack'. And, there are those who want to dig into the details of a topic and learn every nugget of information that the division can provide – a 'meal'. Adopting this construct forces staff to identify the most important elements of a communication and significantly increases the probability that more stakeholders will at least skim division materials.

This concept provides audiences with clear and concise communication, helps eliminate the use of dense educational jargon, and reduces the likelihood of distributing incorrect information.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications strongly supports professional development and will develop a timeline for staff to take advantage of professional writing/editing workshops that will develop skillsets around the 'Bite, Snack, Meal' concept. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

## 4. Proactively nurture relationships with media outlets and take advantage of opportunities. (TA, EA)

News media play an integral role in the dissemination of information to connected stakeholders and are especially important when attempting to communicate with unconnected community members. Since news media may be the only source of information about the division for some audiences, a strategic media plan helps the division proactively share stories, dispel rumors and address inaccuracies. Building and maintaining good relationships with reporters also gives the division opportunities to shine beyond the city's borders, especially given national and international media located in the Washington, D.C., metro area.

Media training is integral to the success of the division's media outreach efforts. Every school and department leader should participate in media training and mini-sessions should be incorporated into several leadership meetings over the course of each school year. These mini-sessions can include

# // Recommendations: Best Foot Forward

discussions of previous interactions as well as simulated interview scenarios.

Additionally, when a division representative is scheduled to be interviewed, the staff member must be prepared for the interaction. This prep work should not be within the sole purview of the Director of Communications as this limitation results in missed opportunities. Once other division leaders and members of the communications team have received training and mastered media skills, they should be able to confer and advise as needed.

One caveat: Communication through media must be strategic and fit within the goals and objectives of the division. There are instances when media will call on the division to participate in stories that are inappropriate or that do not help the division with its strategic communications objectives. These opportunities should be respectfully declined with clear rationales provided to both media and any involved staff.

**Management’s Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications strongly supports the development of a strategic media plan to increase and enhance the strategy around story identification and pitching in line with division key messaging. Projected Implementation Date: June 2020*

*The Office of Communications will bring in contractors to conduct media training for ACPS leadership, principals and the School Board and will develop and share a plan for these training sessions. See the job description for the Chief of School and Community Relations. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

*The Office of Communications is always on hand to prepare the interviewee and support them during the interview, however, given the array of responsibilities of the director of communications, other staff can be trained in media preparation and media skills. The relative newness of staff responsible for media in the Office of Communications means that staff within the team are able to deliver media preparation for less-controversial interviews, however, they are still honing the skills needed to train staff for more difficult media interview situations. It is anticipated that staff in the Office of Communications will be able to support the delivery of this preparation work within the next six months. In addition, SLT members and principals will be trained in media preparation so that they can potentially support the delivery of this responsibility in the future. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

## 5. Ensure events are planned well in advance and meet division standards. (SA, TA, IA)

Special events, town halls, school openings and activities held in division schools give members of the community opportunities to visit division schools and buildings and should give attendees a glimpse into a well-run and professional organization. Recent school openings and events have been well-received and have enhanced connections with those who attended. However, some concern was shared with auditors about behind-the-scenes hiccups that could have negatively impacted these events. Issues will occur, but proactive scheduling of required tasks will help reduce the number of problems that must be addressed at the last minute.

The project management platform recommended earlier in this report should be used to the fullest



# // Recommendations: Best Foot Forward

extent when planning a special event, and the availability and functionality of event-planning components should be reviewed prior to adopting any platform. Also as noted earlier, professional development in event planning should be scheduled and offered to build a cadre of experienced staff who can assist when needed.

The details of special events, meetings and feedback opportunities should be more widely disseminated, especially among division leaders. Multiple communications vehicles should be utilized and notifications should be posted as soon as possible. When the date or time of a special event is changed, every effort should be made to ensure that the updated information is widely distributed.

**Management's Response:** *Management agrees with the recommendation. The Office of Communications agrees that planning is key to the delivery of successful events. Removing the division receptionist role from the administrative assistant role will allow for better event planning and support. In addition, professional development opportunities will be identified for staff who fulfil these roles within the team. The Office of Communications will adopt a project management tool that will help cross manage planning for events.*

**Projected Implementation Date:** *September 2020*

*The Office of Communications supports the recommendation that special events are posted promptly to the ACPS/school calendars. This will be included in the communications protocols training developed for ACPS leadership, principals and school staff. Projected Implementation Date: September 2020*

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## // 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.