

October 3, 2009

TO: Heath Morrison, Superintendent, Washoe County School District

FROM: Terry Abbott, Chairman, Drive West Communications

RE: **Review of Washoe County School District Communications**

Background, methodology and acknowledgements

Officials of The Broad Center contacted me on June 30, 2009 to request that I work with newly appointed Washoe County School District Superintendent Heath Morrison to conduct a review of communications operations at the school district and to present findings and recommendations to the superintendent. Dr. Morrison and I met in Washington D.C. on July 24 and made subsequent arrangements for me to visit Reno for an onsite review of the communications operations on September 3 and 4, 2009.

Dr. Morrison's assistant Sherry Miceli worked with me to arrange a series of one-on-one interviews and group meetings on-site in Reno with key district leaders, including board members, department heads, school principals and community members. These individual interviews yielded a significant amount of information about the communications structures, procedures and performance at the school district. The information from those interviews, along with a review of copies of communications products provided by the school district and found online at the district website, provided the foundation for this report.

During the visit to Reno, I also conducted for the Washoe County School District leadership team, principals and communications office a training session focusing on increasing the amount of news and information created and delivered by the school district to the public and the media.

The leadership team at Washoe County, from Superintendent Morrison and board members to the communications staff, the administrative support team, and department leaders were very gracious with their time and attention. The entire team was willing and eager to provide details about the communications functions,



capabilities and history of the district. Their support for this communications review was vital and is gratefully acknowledged.

Findings

STRENGTHS

There is tremendous excitement among school district leaders and community members about the arrival of the new superintendent. Dr. Morrison's very active approach to community and internal communications in his early days on the job has been well received by community leaders and cheered by district employees. The media coverage of the superintendent's first weeks in office has been outstanding.

The Washoe County School District's communications director has much experience at, and is widely praised for, responding to media inquiries and managing crisis communications situations. Throughout the district, the communications director's handling of tough interviews is praised, and he is widely seen as having strong relationships with members of the media.

There are many eager staff members in the communications department who are ready and willing to help the district improve its communications. They are loyal to the district and excited by the prospects for improvement under the new superintendent. Communications department members speak openly and honestly about the problems the district has in its communications operations and express no fear at tackling the challenge to fix those problems. Some of the news releases produced by the communications department are well written, and department staff members responded well to recommendations made on-site for improvements in news production.

The district's executive leadership and board members expressed a strong commitment to improving both internal and external communications.

The Washoe County School District is situated in a media market seen as mostly willing to be supportive of the school district and willing to publish and air news stories about the district's successes.

The district makes good use of its automatic notification system, Connect-ED, to inform parents and community members of important news and information from schools. *(In the interests of full disclosure, I should report that Blackboard Connect, owner of the Connect-ED system, is one of Drive West Communications' strategic partners.)*

CHALLENGES

The communications department's leadership has not been sufficient for the district's overall communications needs

During the course of my interviews with board members, staff, community members and principals in Reno, the most often repeated phrase to describe the district's communications efforts was: *"we're reactive, not proactive."* That is a strong signal that the district's leadership in communications is not sufficient.

The Communications Director is widely praised in the district for his ability to respond to news media inquiries. He is routinely called "excellent" in giving interviews to media in response to breaking news. But interviews with communications department staff members and leaders of the district and a review of the output of the communications department suggest that the communications director's leadership, at its current level, of the entire communications effort of the district is not sufficient.

"Our communications department has been more reactive than proactive. This department did not have that vision. It was 'wait till something happens, ' " a district official said. Asked why the communications department doesn't do more to promote the district, the executive responded: "It's a leadership issue. (The communications director) is a wonderful person, but the department isn't professional. They don't understand what needs to be done. (The communications director) is an outstanding communicator for something that happens. He knows how to respond, what not say. But I don't believe he's a leader." A board member, in a separate interview, signaled agreement: "There wasn't any drive or ambition (in the communications department) to exceed (our) lackadaisical culture. The communications director can go out and talk off the cuff – he does a superb job in a relaxed easy manner. Is that department driven -- are they tackling the big picture of getting all the district on a PR page together? No. We need to find the right person for the right job. Maybe it needs to be multiple persons. Are the right people sitting in the communications department with the right skills?"

That theme emerged in interviews with communications department team members as well. One communications department official said The Communications Director has been in his *"role for a very long time"* and doesn't *"necessarily having a full skill set to grow (the communications) department's (skills), to develop it to be more effective and efficient. It's been kind of complacent."* Asked to describe the atmosphere in the department, the official said: *"safe, comfortable, complacent, secure, routine."*

A top community leader made a similar point: *"I'd like to see a lot more (creation of news about the district). There are so many more good stories to be told about successes the school district is having. The bulk of the stories we get tend to be the negative ones. (The communications director) does ... an exceptional job, but it tends to be more reactive. He's always reacting to this news. That's been one of the many concerns that I've had. We need to be more proactive in getting stories out. We need to heighten the awareness of people about what the district has accomplished. Heath has a tremendous personality to bring those undercurrents out."*

The communications department has a large staff, with 11 direct reports to the director of the department, but does not produce nearly enough news and information for the media and the public for a school district the size of Washoe County's

Most school district leaders agree the coverage of the school district by the Reno Gazette-Journal is generally fair and mostly supportive. Many school districts across America have much more adversarial local newspapers, for example, than does the Washoe County district.

Still the district does not produce nearly enough news and should be receiving much more coverage in the newspaper and, particularly, on television. The district makes no effort to get media coverage of such major issues as the budget, and does not take advantage of the opportunity of the release of test scores to hold news conferences to announce results. In addition, too many of the news releases produced by the school district to inform media coverage are not written in strong news story style.

The problem of the lack of sufficient news generated by the Washoe County School District – and the lack of good internal communications with employees – may be partly the result of a culture that discourages promotion of news and information about the district. One executive team member said the use of the media and internal communications to tell the district's story has not been a priority. Now, things are changing, this individual said, and it is clear there is a different focus. A board member agreed: *"I think district likes to keep things among the staff and not let it out. There's a little of the circling of the wagons that goes on."*

One of the most striking statements I heard during this communications review was on the subject of this culture of non-communication. A school principal stated bluntly that the culture has required the district to downplay the individual successes of schools. *"At times it is discouraged because they don't want one school to look better than the other. There has been a real emphasis on not doing it. One school got a huge award and couldn't promote it because they didn't want*

to make one school look good. One school got off the AYP list. It is a great story but it has not been showcased. It's just been the general culture. I told people I wanted my school to be the highest achieving school in the district and was told it isn't about that."

Whether it is caused by a culture of non-communication or simple failure to get the job done, clearly the district has not produced enough news and information for the media and the public. A review of news releases posted online at the school district's website shows the district produced 79 news releases in 2009 through October 2, or about eight per month. In 2008, far fewer news releases were produced – only 43 were posted on the website for the entire year, fewer than four a month. The district should produce substantially more news for coverage by the television and radio stations and electronic media.

Obvious major media coverage opportunities passed without the district producing news releases to help inform the coverage. For example, the Washoe district does not produce news releases to highlight its budget development and passage, an issue that should be a major news opportunity in any school district. *"There is no news release about the budget – traditionally they have resisted that, they have not promoted it,"* a district executive said.

Some of the news releases produced by the communications department are well written, and others are not. For example, this news release about SAT scores contains a very confusing lede:

2009 District SAT Scores Move Higher In All Areas

September 1, 2009

The 2009 SAT scores for the Washoe County School District continue to outpace the state and national averages, but the five-year trend is downward. Scores from last year, however, have improved, possibly signaling a reversal of the trend.

The lede paragraph of the news story is confusing, signaling both that scores are up and down. The news release misses an opportunity to help the media report that Washoe County is beating the national and state averages on test scores while still facing a significant achievement gap. Unfortunately, local television station KOLO posted the story with a headline that read "SAT Scores on the Rise?" and including the confusing language.

This important news release about the school district's H1N1 precautions wasn't written in new story style at all:

District Takes Steps To Combat H1N1

August 31, 2009

*As you may know, the typical seasonal flu and H1N1 or “swine flu” can both be easily spread from person to person. Therefore, we are taking steps to reduce the spread of both types of flu in the Washoe County School District. We’re sanitizing all common surfaces daily and encouraging the use of hand sanitizers. We’re isolating students who become sick and sending them home until they get better. We want to keep schools open to students and functioning in a normal manner during this coming flu season. **But, we need your help to do this.***

The district’s August 23, 2009 news release on ACT scores outpacing state and national average was very well written and the newspaper coverage reflected it, but I was unable to locate any television coverage of the announcement. District officials said the school district generally does not hold news conferences or events to generate news coverage on television of such test score information, another significant failure by the district. *“We don’t have a big press conference (regarding test scores),”* a top district executive acknowledged. *“I think we’re reactive. ... We usually start dealing with test scores after the fact.”*

“Back to school” season is a very important annual opportunity for school districts to create very positive news coverage. Districts should produce news story-style news releases each summer with details about new developments in the school district for the upcoming school year. These news releases can be very effective in helping to inform first-day-of-school coverage. The Washoe County district’s back-to-school release this year, however, wasn’t written in news story style at all. The lede of the news release was:

Getting a new school year off to a good start can positively influence a student’s attitude, confidence and performance both academically and socially.

A strong lede is critical to every good news story, but the back-to-school news release, and others, failed to deliver a strong opening paragraph and a good, solid story to help drive coverage.

The communications department’s leadership, despite the lack of enough strong news story style releases, still believes the district gets *“great coverage on the whole.”* But communications staff members know that not enough is being done to create news. *“We are not proactive at all (in creating news). I think it’s because the district has been very reactive. Time has been spent reacting to bad news. That’s taken up all the resources. There’s a lot of good stuff to tell, but we’ve been very, very reactive,”* a communications department official said.

The district seems to have made little effort to attract and shape the all-important television coverage that can reach so many community members, and makes no real effort to create and drive news media coverage about the important work of

the school board. A communications department official said television stations mostly report *"stories at the school level. The television stations and newspaper do an awful job of following district news and the board meetings. The newspaper has not had a writer to cover board meetings in two years."*

Rather than take advantage of a great opportunity to produce news in advance of the board meeting for short-staffed media outlets looking for news, the Washoe County School District's communications department works with media to try to obtain coverage mostly after decisions are made by the board. The district seems to make no effort to generate individual news stories about individual school board meeting agenda items in advance of the board meetings and no real effort, beyond general "pitch" calls to media, to generate coverage on board meeting day of those previously identified important agenda items.

"I'm in the business of trying to create most of the news after the fact," a communications department official said of the board meetings. *"We put out news releases after the board meeting. ... We've done it two or three times. ... We do pitch calls in advance of the board meetings, but not news releases."*

The lack of effort by the district communications office to create more news coverage is noticed by district leaders. *"I don't think the newspaper covers us very much. TV is hit and miss. There's not as much coverage as we need to get,"* one district leader said. Asked why he thinks there is not more coverage of the school district, the leader responded: *"I don't think the district is doing enough to generate more coverage. We're the largest employer in the county, we have 64,000 kids. There should be more coverage."* Another top district executive agreed. When asked about the district's own effort to create news coverage, the executive responded: *"I can't say we do a lot. We could better utilize (news releases)."* And one of the district's highest ranking officials expressed disappointment that more news isn't produced: *"We don't tell our story well. We don't get out much news. I don't know that we've ever had a plan to do it. Nobody has ever owned it. There is a lack of a thorough action plan because we have tons of good news. It's a matter of being aggressive about it. ... There are so many good things happening here. We've got to get the word out. It's not just communications department – we all have to own it and be strategic."* A top district official who works closely with community engagement said: *"We're not even close to (proactive). We don't have a strategic view of communications."*

One board member gave the district's news creation effort a *"C-minus. We hear on a constant basis out in the community 'you're not communicating.' The perception is we're not going a good job.* (The new superintendent has intensified the flow of information and news). *How do you get that to happen year-round? I don't think we do the same intensity sending it out. We're reactive not proactive."* Another board

member said *"our message isn't getting out there. From the stuff that I see, I would say they (the communications department) at best do a fair job. I think we do the perfunctory things ... but no one would accuse us of being ahead of the curve. We're probably more reactive than proactive."*

A district official said the communications department has done very little to promote news coverage of the construction work under the bond program. A review of the website confirmed the official's view that it is very difficult to find information about the bond program even on the district's own website. *"They had a glassy-eyed look, like a deer in the headlights,"* a district official said of the communications department. *"They had never done this (work to promote the bond construction program). We've had to step up and do what we think is the communications department's responsibility."*

Another executive team member said the communications department never seeks information for news stories. *"I have taken stories to communications, and if it's a positive one they'll generally run with it. But if a student has a gun at school, we don't put media releases out. The stone wall has always been that if we don't tell (the public), they won't know. ... There was a huge stone wall."*

One board member described the district's effort to create news as *"pretty good, but there are a lot more stories that could be told."*

The failure to generate more good news from the district has frustrated schools, one top executive who works closely with schools said. *"We're not very proactive. We're not getting positive information out to the community. ... There is a lot of frustration out in the sites. (The communications department) should be constantly asking schools what's going on, the positive things and the negative things. I don't see us being very aggressive in that manner."*

The communications staff is not well organized for the needed emphasis on the timely production of substantially more news. A communications specialist drafts *"most"* of the school district's news releases, and the director drafts *"some"* of the releases. With only two people working on development of news – and most of the work falling on these communications specialists– the department does not have enough resources dedicated to the production of news.

One staff member serves as a graphics designer for publications including the internal newsletter *"Pinnacle"*. She also performs graphic design work for various school district departments and works on flyers, brochures, posters and the course catalogue for community education.

The district webmaster's duties have increased substantially since the arrival of Dr. Morrison and his directive that schools improve their websites. *"The webmaster has gotten increasingly busy"* since Morrison's arrival, a staff member said.

The district's community engagement coordinator draws praise for her work with the school board in arranging public appearances and community engagement activities for board members. She also writes an electronic newsletter for board members, *Boardcast*, which is reported to be distributed to about 8,000 community members but is not distributed on any particular schedule. *"She is great. She helps us to set up events we can attend. I love that,"* a board member said.

A volunteer coordinator recruits volunteers for schools. A parent involvement coordinator also works on professional development and has been assigned to help manage monthly "brown bag" luncheons with employees for the superintendent.

There are three staff members in the communications department's AV media division, an ample supply of staff. But district officials reported the cable television channel programming that comes from the department for a channel shared with a local community college is *"weak"* despite the size of the department. The staff members in the AV division also work on recruitment videos for the human resources department and other requests from throughout the organization. Communications department officials acknowledge the AV office *"needs to do less in-house stuff and do more of our own news and own public affairs on the channel."*

Oddly, one of the staff members in the communications department is actually responsible for community education, not communication. A staff member oversees *"non-credit evening, weekends, and summer programs for self enrichment. ... It's more education than it is in communications,"* a department official said.

The district has no formal internal communications plan; the flow of information from departments and schools to the communications department is inadequate, and internal communications with employees about important district decisions and deliberations is poor; the administration's internal communications with employees are conducted separately from the board's internal communications with employees

The Washoe County School District has a significant internal communications problem, and that problem includes internal communications within the communications department itself, an indication that the leadership of the department has not made a strong enough commitment to internal communications. The district even has a separate internal communications operation for board members to communicate with employees.

The communications department director only recently began meeting with the entire communications team to debrief after cabinet meetings with the superintendent. A department member said in the past, *"If we find out about (important district decisions or activities) it's in passing or in staff meetings or emails. I don't think we were doing a good job of that."* Department members expressed frustration at not knowing more about discussions and decisions at the cabinet level so that they can do a better job in their communications roles. *"Before the new (communications department debriefing after the cabinet) meeting, only one or two people got informed about what went on at cabinet. I complained about not knowing what was going on at cabinet – there was not enough communication. I wasn't told something was happening. It was a mess. I said I think we need to have more (communications department) meetings."*

One communications department official described the staff meetings as *"haphazard."* Asked how closely the communications department official works with the communications director, the official responded: *"it's on a need to know basis. It probably should be closer but it isn't."*

The Washoe district has a district-wide electronic calendar which was designed to capture information about parent involvement and other events. The calendar could provide vitally important information for news stories to be created by the communications department, but communications department members said they were unaware of the calendar. *"We don't know what's going on with each other,"* one communications department member said of the communications problem within the department. Communications staff members complained they need more information. *"I'd like to know what everybody's doing all the time,"* one communications team member said.

During a group meeting with the communications department held during my visit, communications department team members learned about an e-news letter that is distributed to parents, but not to employees, regarding district and community events. This newsletter apparently had not been discussed by the communications team previously, and the director instructed that the newsletter be sent to all members of the department regularly as a result of the meeting for this communications audit.

Too little news is produced about the work of district departments and schools in part because of a relatively unsuccessful effort by the communications department leadership to obtain more information from departments and schools.

Communications department leaders tend to blame the departments and schools for not providing enough information, but others in the school district think the problem lies in the communications department.

Asked if the communications department gets access to information it needs from departments and schools, a communications department official responded: *"Not always. I don't think departments or principals have been all that media savvy. It has sometimes been like trying to pull teeth to get them to send us the good stuff we need to get out there. We've tried different strategies to do that. We've asked principals to delegate it to others. It works for a while and then it peters out. I'll get an email about an activity they plan for 1 p.m. that same day."*

Some department leaders, though, note they get little outreach from the communications department seeking such information. One department leader whose office is near the communications office said the communications department does not come to him seeking information to produce news stories and information for the public. *"They're more reactive than proactive."* And another district leader who works closely with schools also was critical of the communications department for not reaching out enough to schools: *"Right now it's driven more by the schools than by communications. A majority of the time it's (the schools') responsibility to get the information to them. ... I have been here three years and no one (from the communications department) has ever come to me to find out what is going on to try to get news. They've come to me when something has happened that's negative."*

However, another district leader had a different view, saying he gets good support from the communications department. *"We have ongoing interaction. They have been very fluid in supporting us. They will help guide us in our work with the media, and they have good involvement in trying to frame a message for our district."*

Communications department team members complain about a lack of information from schools. *"That's been a bone of contention with me,"* one communications department member said. *"There doesn't seem to be a real good grasp of what's going on in the schools. Schools are so busy they don't have time to write their good stories. But they have time to complain about not getting publicity. One of the biggest issues is timeliness – we're not getting information in time. We're an underutilized resource for schools."*

But school principals interviewed said they have come to expect little outreach from the communications department and have become accustomed to contacting the media directly. *"No one (from the communications department) is approaching us to get out information. ... Emails are sporadic at the start of year. Sometimes they will call about black history month or a poster or poetry contests,"* one principal said. Another said he put out his own news release about an anti-bullying program. *"We just did it on our own. It hasn't been part of the culture that we go to communications department. My school has made AYP two of the last three years"*

after getting off the watch list. It's a great story, but we have gotten nothing (no news release produced by the communications department about the story)."

Many schools produce their own parent newsletters, but communications department team members said they have been unable to regularly obtain copies of those newsletters to aid in the creation of news for media coverage. *"We've asked every school to send a copy (of their newsletters to the communications department) but the response has been less than overwhelming."* A top district executive closely connected to schools confirmed that report: *"Principals are putting together a newsletter anyway. A good principal might say they'll send it up to communications, but sometimes it goes to their supervisor and not to communications. It just never has flowed that smoothly."*

The communications department is making an effort to improve internal communications with an electronically delivered internal staff newsletter. A readership survey in 2008 helped the department decide to produce the newsletter for electronic distribution rather than print distribution. The newsletter is described by communications department leaders as *"a potpourri of information from schools and departments."*

The poor internal communications leaves many employees feeling stranded. *"I have a lot of friends who are teachers who never hear what's going on. They feel isolated. They feel like a lot of things go on that they need to know about are not getting past the principal and down to the teachers,"* a communications department staff member said.

The lack of an internal communications plan has left communications department staff members wondering what to do to deal with the problem. *"Maybe we need to refine how we communicate. People are getting slammed with emails. We're slamming schools with emails. There's got to be a better, more refined process for internal communications,"* one communications department staff member said.

Another casualty of the lack of an internal communications plan is a consistent flow of information from the executive cabinet level through the departments. All cabinet members interviewed said they share information from cabinet meetings with their staffs but none knew whether anyone else at the executive table shared information or did it in the same way. *"Do other departments share information from the executive cabinet meetings? I would guess yes, but I don't know,"* one cabinet member said in a response typical of the others. One executive now on the cabinet said: *"Before I came on to the executive cabinet, (information I received) was through the grapevine. I get (information from executive cabinet meetings) back out to my troops. I don't know if others do it. There's no protocol."*

The district's scatter-shot approach to internal communications can be frustrating for school principals. One district executive who works closely with principals reported: *"For a principal, it's discombobulated. They just throw it (email) at them. I don't think it's respectful of the recipient. It's fragmented. ... Emails are flying, uncoordinated, all over the place."* One school principal said he has one reliable source of internal communication: the teacher's union. *"Too often we find out from teachers who find out from their union first."* That principal and a district executive pointed to the district's communication about a major decision regarding vertical alignment as an example: *"The vertical alignment decision was a big secret. They went to a room and the chairs were aligned vertically and that's how we found out,"* the principal said. *"I have never heard anything about executive cabinet and what decisions are being made there. ... If they tell us before (a decision is made), all hell might break loose and they don't want to deal with that. So they tell us after decision is made and we become a cheerleader, for crying out loud."*

Even board members sense the problems in internal communication among staff. *"We have major silos. One department doesn't know what other department is doing. ... Schools, teachers, administrators all need to understand what we're doing. There is nothing that should go out that doesn't have a common purpose and theme. ... The internal communications process doesn't work at all,"* a board member said.

One communications department official confirmed that the administration's internal communications are *"haphazard. I think it's a huge weakness. I've talked about that on a number of occasions. But that's outside the arena of my current role."*

But one board member expressed high hopes for change. *"The Board has been seen as a necessary evil. The board didn't need to know, so the internal communication wasn't as good as it could have been. I see that changing. Heath will kick us into a much higher gear,"* the board member said.

The school district's non-commercial media communications with the public is still in its infancy

A direct mail magazine to parents is said by communications department leaders to be "still evolving" after a deal was made with the Reno newspaper's custom publications unit to produce it. The newspaper sells the advertising and communications department officials *"think"* the cost of postage can be absorbed along with the production cost by the advertising sold, and the publication will be *"of no cost to us starting in January."* The district surveyed parents about the publication and found *"mixed reviews. Some think it needs to be more issue-oriented, less fluff and feel good stuff. I think it's gotten better over time,"* a

communications official said. One communications department employee spends 20 percent of his work time helping to produce the parent newsletter, and the director spends a *"miniscule"* amount of time on it.

The director of communications decided to stop receiving information about telephone calls from schools through the Connect-ED messaging system that deliver important information to parents

A phone message system can be an important way for school district communications professionals to learn about important activities and work at schools. Careful monitoring of the phone messages schools deliver to parents can produce many good ideas for news stories about the work of schools. However, the Washoe County School District's communications director *"opted out"* of receiving emails about the telephone messages, deciding instead to *"periodically"* look at a list of phone messages. The communications department did not report creating any news stories based on information obtained from the phone message system's use by schools.

Public attitudes about the school district have changed for the worse in recent years, and the district has not responded with a more vigorous community engagement effort

Several district executives and community members raised concerns that the public doesn't support the school district as strongly as it once did, and that the district has not responded by changing its approach to community engagement.

A top leader of the school district made this striking statement: *"My perception has been the district has the attitude 'we know best. Stay the hell out of our business.' That's probably why the public image is bad. We need to get away from the attitude that we are the experts and everyone else's opinion doesn't matter. We need to be a lot more involved with the public. We have a \$450 million budget. We have the money. We need to quit whining and have more dialogue."*

A top leader of the community, interviewed separately, agreed: *"It's our taxpayer dollars. We see on our yearly assessment we're giving so much to the school district. People think 'what (is the district) doing with that money?' ... They haven't been very effective in reaching out to lots of people."*

The changing public attitudes have district officials worried. One executive who works closely with community engagement said *"We have real needs. Things have changed. The way the community feels about the school district and a lot of things has changed. The district was missing in action out there in the business community. A lot of those perceptions are still out there. We're still running things like we did years past."*

The district's website can be confusing and needs improvement; district leaders do not make official use of such "new media" communications tools as Facebook and Twitter

Many school districts across America have started aggressively using such social networking websites as "Facebook" and "Twitter" to communicate with the public. In Washoe County, school district officials report that the school district routinely blocks access to Facebook. Some staff and board members have their own Facebook pages, but the district has no official presence on Facebook or Twitter.

Several district officials said they want to see the school district relax its rules against communicating on such sites as Facebook and Twitter (though a communications department official said the district does not block access to Twitter.) *"I have one of the biggest MySpace profiles, and have the biggest Facebook profile. I've seen so many CEO's and elected officials who have Twitter and Facebook. The district should unblock Facebook and Twitter,"* a board member said.

The school district's website is difficult to navigate and some officials reported frustration in trying to find information on the site. *"Our website is not user friendly. As an example, on the Sunday night before school started ... my son got on the website and couldn't find his bus schedule. ... I don't like our website. The links have not been updated. When it links to my department, it doesn't have my mission statement. The communications department should be telling schools 'we're here to assist you.'"*, a district executive said.

Key Recommendations

The superintendent should consider designating a new chief communications officer for the district

The director of communications clearly has served the district well as spokesperson, and his good relationships with the media have helped bring the district good media coverage. But the serious problems of internal communications within the communications department, the long-term failure by the district to produce more news and information for the media and the public, and the widespread feeling among district leaders and board members that the district has failed to be proactive in its communications efforts are arguments for the superintendent to consider a change in leadership. A new chief communications officer would be charged with the responsibility of pulling the communications department together to work better as a team, knocking down the information barriers existing at the

department level, including the communications department and the schools, and leading the development of a more comprehensive strategy for district communications.

The communications department should be tasked with the specific responsibility of dramatically increasing the district's output of news and information

The Washoe County School District has too many good stories to tell to allow those stories to go untold. It should be unacceptable to the superintendent that no news release about the school district budget is produced, that no news conference to announce test scores is held, and that more aggressive efforts are not made to generate media coverage and public understanding of issues from the first day of school to graduation day. The communications department should at very least be required to double its output of news and to track the coverage on television, radio and newspapers to gauge the success of the effort.

The communications department should be reorganized to devote more resources to the creation of news for use by the media and the public.

The communications department should lead the development of a formal plan for district-wide internal communications

The superintendent should make clear his expectation that schools and departments, including the communications department, will work together to communicate information throughout the district. The communications department must be required to aggressively knock down doors of departments and schools to seek information for news stories and for internal communication. The other departments and the schools should be required by the superintendent to aggressively push information to the communications department.

The new internal communications plan should provide specific requirements for how information from executive level discussions and decisions will be communicated throughout the organization.

The district should commission periodic scientific surveys of employees to determine whether the new internal communications efforts are succeeding in delivering the district's messages to employees and providing staff an opportunity to provide feedback.

Cabinet members, including those who represent schools, should be required to report regularly on progress in internal communications.

The superintendent should commission development of a strategic plan for improved community engagement

The district needs a specific plan for how the superintendent, other leaders of the district, board members, teachers and others will engage with various community groups and the general public in light of the reported concerns about changing attitudes in the community toward the school district.

The superintendent's aggressive initial outreach to the community is to be commended and continued, but the district needs a specific plan for how other leaders of the district will join the engagement effort, how the community will be asked to respond, and how the success of the effort will be judged.

The communications department, others involved in community engagement, board members and willing community leaders could be asked to participate in the development of the plan.

The superintendent should end any vestiges of the reported old culture of non communication

The new superintendent should be troubled by the reports from some that a culture of non communication has existed in the past in the Washoe County school district. The superintendent should make clear to employees and board members in meetings and written directives that the new expectation is for two-way communication, aggressive outreach and transparency. The district should begin celebrating the successes of individual schools and should encourage employees to speak openly in staff meetings about their concerns and issues.

The communications department should immediately begin automatically receiving emails regarding telephone messages delivered by schools through the Connect-ED system

The communications department should be directed to immediately begin reviewing the Connect-ED phone calls for potential news story ideas and producing coverage of those stories.

The district should assemble a focus group to review the district's website for potential improvements, and should immediately remove barriers to access by top district leaders to Facebook and Twitter

A focus group to review the website could provide the district valuable information for use in improving the navigation of the site.

The superintendent, board members and other top district leaders should be allowed and encouraged to open Facebook and Twitter accounts and to interact with community members on those websites about school district issues.