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NSPRA Counselor

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Communication Accountability Program Survey Results Released

Direct E-Communication Is Clear Choice of Parents in NSPRA Member Districts

Surprises Surface in Survey of 43,410 Constituents on Content Issues and Use of Social Media

The first section below gives you global findings of the survey; the second section covers a report from NSPRA's Communication Accountability Program (CAP) Committee which digs deeper and seeks answers to more questions.

To see the results of the entire survey, go to www.nspira.org/2011capsurvey. (To learn about the survey process, see page 4 of this document.)

If you're looking to become the "go-to" resource of school news and information, you must follow the practice of many NSPRA districts and establish direct e-communication links to parents and other constituents. People prefer electronic- or internet-based sources like email, e-newsletters, district websites, and parent portals for their information.

Traditional and Social Media Lag Behind Districts' Direct Communication

Traditional media (newspapers, television, radio, district cable channels) were ranked just above the last tier of preferences by the parents and others who completed this survey in the Spring of 2011. And even more interesting to NSPRA was the near-bottom preferences given to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.

Assumptions are that social media are "too social," lack credibility, and are inappropriate for some school messages; while other people projected the notion that it is still too soon to measure the impact of social media when it comes to effective school communication. Another assumption is that transparency by school

districts in open e-communication helps create a culture of trust with school districts who communicate regularly.

Parents Request More Content on Curriculum

The survey asked parents and others about the kind of content they wanted to receive from their individual schools, their teachers, and the leadership of the district. At the school level, parents' top choice focused on curriculum, educational changes and updates, as well as descriptions of what is being taught.

Operational information on schedules, dates, etc., were naturally high on the list, along with information on how the school is performing compared to other schools in the district and neighboring school districts. With all the news about charter schools and other options, only about a quarter of respondents sought more information about these alternative programs.

Teachers Must Keep Parents Informed About Their Child's Progress

Parents said they wanted teachers to let them know how well their child was doing in the classroom. Some discrepancy was seen between elementary and secondary parents, but for the most part, parents wanted updates on how their children were doing and how they could help them do better.

Parents also asked for timely notices when their child's performance was slipping because they do not want to be surprised at the end of a marking period. Information on behavior, social skills, and the expectations on what their children will be learning during the year were also priorities of many parents.

Tell Us About the Rationale for Decisions

When it came to content issues from school district leaders, both parents and nonparents listed their top tier content requests as:

- ▼ Rationale or reasons for decisions that the school district makes,
- ▼ Curriculum or educational options,
- ▼ Information on how well the school district is performing compared to other school districts, and
- ▼ Budget and finance elections and updates.

A positive note for participating NSPRA member districts is that two-thirds of respondents indicated that adequate opportunities exist to express views

This survey confirms what NSPRA has been preaching for many years.

We receive calls from superintendents and board members saying the media is killing them; they say their coverage on key issues is one-sided and often wrong. Along with some media relations counsel, I then ask callers what they do about communicating their own story. I find, for the most part, that they still rely on the media. Thus the cycle of misinformation and lack of support continues once again. It is not the media's job to tell your story; it's yours.

This survey proves that where schools provide genuine two-way, credible, ongoing communication, they are held in higher esteem and serve as the "go-to resource" for information.

Let's hope that more districts learn that building support for education rests on great everyday work and that they do not hand off the critical and authentic communication function to outside media or the growing number of neighborhood bloggers.

Rich Bagin, APR
NSPRA Executive Director

about the issues affecting their schools. However, 47% of parents and 57% of nonparents believe that their views are seriously considered by school district leadership.

NSPRA leaders felt that even the 50% figure was higher than most other school districts where an ongoing, trusted communication program is **not** in place. These results also demonstrate that school districts that communicate well with their communities provide more than one-way communication; they also provide an opportunity for dialogue and constructive criticism.

When Should We Communicate?

How often should the school district provide updates to parents and the community?

Respondents believed that the district should provide updates as often as major decisions were being considered. Most respondents showed little support for quarterly or less frequent updates. This request for timely information reinforces the respondents' desire for school to be the first source for information. People do not want to search for information, nor do they want to wait for secondary sources to report the information.

A major lesson here is to continuously communicate in a credible fashion.

Two Final Communication Notes

Respondents tended to feel less well-informed about statewide issues affecting education. Only 39% of parents indicated that they are *pretty well informed* or *very well informed*. With more state decisions about testing and financing looming, it may be time to step up communication on statewide issues.

More than 64% of parents and nonparents indicated that their districts' education services were *above average* or *excellent* in NSPRA districts. The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll released just this month noted that 51% of respondents gave their local schools an A/B. One assumption is that school districts that invest in communication and that are open and transparent receive higher marks from communities they serve.

To read the entire survey, go to www.nspira.org/2011capsurvey

The message is clear. Open, honest and transparent communication is the best antidote to public mistrust. This research finds the institutions that invest in communication, and provide opportunities for dialogue and dissent, are the first choice for information about the services they provide.

Ron Koehler, APR, NSPRA President

About the Survey

Seeking more research and usable data about the current trends in school communication is an objective of NSPRA's Communication Accountability Program (CAP). Working with NSPRA staff and leadership, the committee created an email survey to be used by all NSPRA member districts. The project was made possible through a partnership with K12 *Insight*, Inc. (Go to www.k12insight.com to learn more about the services provided by our partner company.)

The purpose of the study was to assess baseline data in learning the communication preferences of parents and non-parents in NSPRA-member districts. NSPRA members were given the opportunity to use this survey in their districts with no external costs to the districts. More than 1,600 member districts were offered this complimentary communication survey. Initially, 105 districts signed a letter of intent, and then 50 districts participated in the survey which took place from February through April 2011. The participating districts each received their confidential results in May while the compiled results, with no identification of the districts, were partially released in July at NSPRA's San Antonio Seminar.

Some demographic information, provided by the 50 participating districts includes:

- ▼ Responding districts were located in 22 states, with Texas (6) being the highest of the state participants followed in second place by Ohio, Washington, Minnesota, and Missouri, all with 4 participants.
- ▼ Some 31 of the 50 participants (62%) labeled themselves as suburban, followed by 8 (16%) being urban, while 6 (12%) were rural, and 3 (6%) were exurban. Two participants did not complete the description question.
- ▼ Enrollment of the participating districts:
 - ▼ ..Less than 2,500 4
 - ▼ ..2,501-5,000 10
 - ▼ ..5,001-10,000 13
 - ▼ ..10,001-15,000 3
 - ▼ ..15,001-20,000 6
 - ▼ ..Greater than 20,000 14

The survey looked at three levels of communication: **school building-to-home**, **classroom-to-home**, and **school district-to-community**. The survey was primarily aimed at parents and sought feedback on communication content, delivery systems, and frequency of communication. Participants were asked how well informed they were about local and state issues, how they rated the quality of education services and how they felt about opportunities to express concerns and have those concerns considered by local school officials. They were also asked about parent involvement in their districts.

Within the 50 participating districts, 268,917 residents were invited to participate in the email survey. Each district provided the list of email invitees for completion of the survey. The survey response rate was 16% with a 43,410 responses. Participants were asked to respond concerning communication with their oldest child in school. Parents' responses were segregated into elementary or secondary responses.

More Survey Assumptions and Considerations

Positive Findings and Assumptions

A number of very positive data points emerged from a national survey of 50 NSPRA-member school districts. Several of the points provide a refreshing contrast to many of the anti-public education sentiments portrayed in the media in recent years.

- ▼ Schools that excel at communication not only provide information, but they also promote opportunities for dialogue and constructive criticism within their communities.
- ▼ Parents and nonparents rate their schools and district favorably. Just under two-thirds of all respondents rate their school district as *above average* or *excellent*, with more than 70% of parents agreeing that their child is receiving an *above average* to *excellent* education.
- ▼ Data from all respondents underscore the importance of engaging your school community in decisionmaking, with high percentages of both parents and nonparents wanting to know about *rationale/reasons for decisions* and *curriculum/education program options*. Data comparing local school performance to other schools at the state and national levels and information about budgets and taxes rounded out the top four on both groups' "need to know" lists.
- ▼ Given the importance of engagement, data also support that the school districts that participated in this survey are doing a good job listening to their communities on important issues impacting schools and are seriously considering their communities' feedback.
- ▼ Nearly all respondents could find information about the schools easily or with some effort.
- ▼ Almost two-thirds of nonparents indicated they are *very* or *pretty well informed* about their local school district and more than half reported being aware of statewide issues impacting public education.
- ▼ More than 80% of all respondents reported feeling *somewhat informed* about issues impacting their local school district, with parents of elementary students feeling the most in touch with what's happening at their child's school.
- ▼ Parents value direct, proactive communication from their schools or districts. They want to hear directly from the school or district rather than from secondary sources.
- ▼ Parents have an underestimated interest in what and how their students are learning; they want to hear about curriculum, classroom, and their child.
- ▼ Most parents still like the methods most schools use to communicate with them (email, websites, online portals, email newsletters, rapid communication systems).

Giving your community a seat at the table is one of the best investments your district can make.

Even in trying economic times, with scrutiny for public education increasing daily and the demand for accountability growing exponentially, investing in a commitment to keep your community informed will pay dividends for years to come. These data back that up.

People support public schools that have an ongoing, everyday commitment to transparently and proactively communicating with their community about the important decisions as well as the mundane.

Yes, it will take people and resources to do the job and do it well. However, it's a small price to pay when the return on your investment is credibility and support within your community.

Chris Tennill, APR
Chair

NSPRA's CAP Committee

Some Unexpected Points of Interest

When a group is surveyed for the first time, the unexpected or surprising data points can be even more interesting than the supportive ones. The CAP Committee found a number of data points within the survey very surprising, including:

- ▼ **Parents are genuinely interested in curriculum and instruction.** While it isn't surprising that curriculum and instruction items ranked high, few would expect them to be Number One. This reinforces the notion that parents no longer want to be mere bystanders in their child's education; they want to go beyond the PTO events and be active in their child's education. Gone are the days where that MO was limited to high-performing school districts. Across the board, parents want to be aware of (and likely involved in) changes in curriculum and programs – a great thing to share with local media who dominate headlines with school board squabbles, constant budget updates, and minor political issues as opposed to what's going on in the classroom.
- ▼ **Nonparents report being more informed than parents.** More nonparents (65%) feel *very well* or *pretty well* informed than parents (47%) when responding to the question: *How well informed do you feel about the issues impacting education in your local school district?* The same trend holds true for awareness of statewide issues impacting education. How is it that the group without a direct, daily connection to public schools is the more informed of the two?
- ▼ **School districts need to evolve into their own news source.** Traditional media (TV, radio and commercial print) continues to die a slow and painful death and become an increasingly unimportant source of information. Data from this survey backs up what the folks behind the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism have been saying for years. School districts must consider building effective communication strategies on the idea that districts must become their own news source.
- ▼ **Social media may not be catching on as quickly as we think it is.** Parents really like email. However, parents and nonparents aren't using social media to get information about their school districts (it ranked in the bottom four sources of information for both groups). Even though this past year has seen social media used as a highly effective crisis communication tool (as in the Joplin, Missouri tornado), survey data indicate that it still doesn't have that strong of a foothold among our school communities. This may be a wake-up call for districts to do or continue the hard work of collecting accurate addresses and using email as a vehicle to give parents the information they really want (an idea which also fits nicely into the concept of districts becoming their own news source).

Further Investigation Within the Survey

In weeding through the initial overall survey data, CAP Committee members suggested the areas in which NSPRA should consider digging into and disaggregating data, if feasible and available: (*Note: NSPRA is currently working with K12 Insight, Inc., on these items.*)

- ▼ Identify preferred methods of communication from school for elementary, middle school, and high school parents.
- ▼ Look deeper into the issue of nonparents being more informed than parents. How do sources of information compare among those who are the most informed within the two groups?
- ▼ Is there a correlation between the percentage of those who feel *very well/pretty well informed* and the overall rating/perception of the local school district? And is there a correlation between those who feel their concerns are seriously considered and the overall rating/perception of the local school district?

- ▼ Does the priority given to “parent involvement opportunities” change when disaggregated among those who currently volunteer and those who don’t?
- ▼ Does the overall survey data change when disaggregated by the:
 - ▼ type of district (suburban, urban or rural)?
 - ▼ size (enrollment) of district?
 - ▼ communications staffing and/or budget?

Considerations for Further Study

It’s only natural that an inaugural survey such as this one serves to generate as many, if not more, questions than it actually answers.

1. This survey provided data on school districts that are NSPRA members (and assumingly have some type of communications staffing). There is the opportunity to seal the deal and bring concrete validity to years of CAP work by running this same survey in school districts that are not NSPRA members or do not have any communication staff.
2. Social media ranked low as a preferred method of communication. However, it continues to dominate professional development opportunities provided by myriad communication organizations and associations. Why did it rank so low? Is it a credibility issue? Do parents just prefer other communication channels over social media? Are they more comfortable with other communication channels? Are schools using social media in a way they don’t find beneficial? Where’s the disconnect? Are administrators not providing what users need or is the user need just not there?
3. Nonparents reported being *very well/pretty well informed* about their local school district and how statewide issues will impact it (much higher than parents). Where are nonparents getting their information? Do school districts assume, since parents are supposedly more “plugged in,” that they don’t need to interpret things for them? Could this be due to the fact that nonparents who self-selected into this survey are more involved in the community as a whole and thus more likely to both participate in the survey and to be more informed about the schools? It would be interesting to conduct a smaller survey of nonparents, get a higher response rate, and compare the results.
4. Parents prefer to hear from their child’s school on a weekly basis. It would be helpful to know what type of communication they want weekly. Is it the areas that they responded in “information desired from school” question? There might not be too much to report on in these areas weekly, so is it better to stay in contact weekly or just when significant developments take place?
5. Elementary parents gave their teacher more favorable marks for communicating than secondary parents. Is that a product of elementary students having one homeroom teacher versus secondary students having several teachers? Before we say this is a problem, we might want to drill down and find out whether secondary parents really want to be more informed. Maybe they’re satisfied. And if they do want more info, perhaps we should find out specifically what type of information they’d like to get more of. It’s likely different from elementary parents and maybe secondary teachers don’t fully understand what parents want to know. One could also speculate that secondary teachers have more parents to communicate with because they have more students.

6. More than 80% of parents are at least *sometimes* involved in their child's school. Of those parents who volunteer, what drives them to do so?
7. Parents — particularly elementary parents — reported that teachers do a very good job of communicating with them about their child's progress. It might be interesting to drill down to find out how the teachers are doing it (personal conversations, notes home, email, etc.), and what method the parents prefer.
8. The survey was moot on face-to-face communication. What value do respondents see in face-to-face communication? When do they find that type of communication most necessary and effective?
9. **The top five preferred methods of communication identified by parents and nonparents were some form of electronic communication.** Since it was an electronic survey, some participants may have been leaning in favor of e-communication from the start. But we must realize that consumer needs are changing. The backpack folder may no longer be the primary source of information for parents. Communicators must use multiple mediums to effectively deliver messages. But we still must listen to our results showing that many constituents want and prefer instant electronic information.



About the K12 Insight Partnership

NSPRA owes its corporate partner K12 Insight, Inc., special thanks and recognition for providing the technical, operational, and counseling support to complete this survey of participating districts. K12 Insight provides district leaders and school boards with a proven way to build highly engaged and trusted relationships with parents, teachers, students and members of the community. NSPRA's partner company offers an innovative, technology-driven solution to raise the level of "Trust Capital" for administrators. Their solution is based on a Systems implementation of stakeholder engagement that is a timely alternative to the random, reactionary and episodic approach prevalent in school districts.

The market value of K12 Insight, Inc.'s contribution to this project is estimated at over \$500,000. NSPRA urges school leaders to contact K12 Insight, Inc., at www.k12insight.com to learn more about their engagement solutions and other highly relevant services they provide to leading school districts across the U.S. and Canada.

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A final word ...

Yes, we now know what the survey says. But each school district must complete its own research to see what its parents and other constituents prefer when it comes to communication. Use these results for just what they are — a compiled list of responses from 50 NSPRA districts and what 43,410 constituents told us about their preferences in school communication. See if these trends match your district's preferences to fine-tune your communication effort to be even more efficient than it is now.



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