

Communications Audit Report

**Prepared for the Great Valley School District
May 2016**

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Introduction

Goal of the Communications Audit

The Great Valley School District is a high-performing, small, suburban, affluent school district that is sought after by families who want a high quality education for their children. As the Great Valley School District looks ahead to the next several years and strives for continual improvement, it has identified communications and engagement as an area of focus. Its Comprehensive Plan (submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Education in July 2015), developed by community members, staff, and parents, lists this as one of its five goals.

One of the action steps under this goal is to conduct a communications assessment of the district's current communication methods and "explore communication frameworks and models that could be implemented to improve upon our current structures." The report also states the district should: "Develop and implement a plan to improve upon current communication structures and to increase engagement opportunities for stakeholders throughout the district."

Shortly after being appointed superintendent of the Great Valley School District in July, 2015, Dr. Regina Speaker-Palubinsky asked Communications Consultant Beth Trapani to submit a proposal to the Great Valley School Board to conduct a communications audit. Some initial planning of the audit occurred in fall, 2015. Focus groups with staff, community members, parents, and students were held early in 2016, and surveys were conducted with each of these groups in Spring, 2016. The audit also included a brief review of existing communication vehicles, including district and school newsletters, email announcements, and the website.

The goals of the audit were to seek data, opinions and perceptions from all major stakeholder groups, determine themes and attitudes with regards to communication, and propose recommendations for ways in which to improve the effectiveness and management of communications based on that data and information.

During this process, several themes emerged. There was a broad sense of dissatisfaction from staff with internal communications. Many said they routinely received conflicting answers from administrators in response to questions, and had no clear sense of districts goals or vision. Many reported that teachers and support staff aren't included in decisions and aren't adequately informed when decisions are made. Many said they felt as though they had no voice in the district and that morale was very low.

Parents seemed mostly pleased with communication, with the strong exception of frustration with the lack of consistency in the way teachers communicate with them about assignments, grades, and student progress. Some were also troubled by recent district-level communication about curriculum changes.

Community members felt somewhat disengaged from the school district, a theme that is common for school districts that often struggle to find ways to connect with people who aren't directly affiliated with their schools.

Despite any communication challenges, support for the school district is strong, and all groups pointed to the excellent staff and students within the district and said they felt great pride in being a member of the school district community.

The National School Public Relations Association conducts extensive research nationwide, and finds a strong correlation between high-achieving school systems and those that intentionally focus on proactive, planned, inclusive communications. As communication in a school district increases, employees, parents and community members all feel more informed, involved, and invested.

At the same time, school districts are limited in their resources and must carefully choose how they will leverage their communication time, energy, and dollars. Simple changes and systems can be put in place that cost no money and little time, but reap huge payoffs in terms of the ability for audiences to feel informed and have a chance to dialogue with school administrators and school board members. The ensuing communications recommendations work to capitalize on these kinds of changes, focusing on simple/easy solutions and methods as well as more time-intensive and expensive ones.

The Great Valley School District is fortunate to have a Director of Communications and Outreach. The job description for this position at the time of the writing of this audit includes many of the recommendations in this audit. Many of these recommendations will only be successful if the responsibility for them is shared by the district's administrators and those appointed to assist in the implementation of them (e.g. staff who serve on committees, etc.)

Finally, it should be noted that when school systems undertake a communications audit, it's assumed they wish to view the system and its work through the perceptions of others. However, whenever opinions are solicited there can be a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is important because it guides improvement. However, it's also important to recognize the good work of employees, the positives of the system, and the support of the community. It is obvious from surveys and focus groups that there is a tremendous amount of pride in the Great Valley School District, its programs, staff, and students.

"People move here for our schools," said one focus group participant. "Academically, it's an excellent school district." It's important to recognize and reward the good things happening and the great work of the kind and caring educators who are making them happen.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a review of district publications, 12 focus groups, and a total of 1,451 surveys:

- 786 parents out of a possible 1,891 families responded – 41% response rate;
- 476 staff members out of a possible 664 - 71% response rate;
- 189 community members out of a possible 4,500 postcards mailed (The district tried to target people who live/work in the community but who don't currently have children in the school district.) - .04% response rate

The focus groups were each an hour to an hour and a half long, conducted in January, 2016 at District Office and at Great Valley High School by Beth Trapani. Participants were identified by administrators (it was recommended they make an attempt to choose a diverse group instead of only selecting "the usual suspects" – people who are always quick to volunteer, lead initiatives, etc.) Groups varied in size from 3 to 24 participants, and they were instructed to speak freely without fear that their comments would be attributed to any one individual. Most participants were very forthcoming and quick to respond with praise, criticism, and suggestions for improvement. The same basic questions were put forth to the groups:

- What is your overall perception of Great Valley?
- What parts of communications are strong in Great Valley?
- What could be better?
- Where do you get information about the district and where/how would you like to get it?
- What changes do you think the district could make to better communicate?
- What are your priorities for areas of improvement?

From these questions sprang a lot of conversation as the group drilled down to specifics on some areas that were clearly important to them. *It was notable that staff said it was refreshing to have someone ask for and listen to their opinions. Moving forward, this audit will recommend the district seek to find ways to that in more frequent and meaningful ways.*

Other notes of interest:

- The response rate to the communication surveys was fairly low. It's recommended that the district re-survey next year to try to evaluate its communications efforts and improvements.
- High school students were interviewed in a focus group but the district did not run a student survey specifically on communications. Among all groups, the student focus group was most satisfied and complimentary of communications.

Guiding Principles for the Great Valley School District's Communications Efforts

- 1. *All communication efforts must be tied to the district's goals and objectives.***
Communication efforts must be driven by the district' overall mission, goals and objectives, and be designed to support teaching and learning. Staff and parents must be given the utmost consideration since they are the keys to increased student achievement.
- 2. *Strategic communication requires research and evaluation to be woven throughout the communication effort.***
This audit is a starting point, but the district will need to continue to ask its staff, parents, and community for their opinion of new publications, websites, meeting structures, etc. if it is to continue to improve. Additionally, major communication systems should be evaluated annually, and communication should be a component of the annual evaluations of district administrators and principals.
- 3. *Internal communication must be a priority.***
No communication effort will be successful if employees feel disenfranchised, confused, or uninformed. Staff members have the ability to make or break the image of their school district. Many of them live in the community, and many have close relationships with the district's parents. Employees should be provided with the information, tools and training to become ambassadors for the district. While they might not agree with all district-level or building-level decisions, if they're well informed and involved in the processes they are more likely to support them or at least not disparage administration and board members for making the decisions.
- 4. *Any communication effort should be viewed from the lens of many different audiences, with an eye on engaging and involving, rather than disenfranchising.***
The district will enjoy greater support by collaborating with its many different audiences and by thinking specifically about what kinds of information each audience needs and how they can be engaged and involved.
- 5. *The district should work to ensure communication is an integral part of any plans for changes, improvements, etc.***
Each plan, development, change, etc. should have a "mini" communications plan built into it, and that plan should be shared with administrators to ensure that everyone is sharing consistent messages and information, and understand who is responsible for each part of the communication.

6. ***Technology should continue to be used to support an efficient, timely and effective system of communication.***

The district should continue to work to refine its use of email, social media, and other means of communicating through technology. Increasingly it is how students and parents communicate.

7. ***Communications must be two-way.***

When school districts work to improve communication they most often focus on getting information out to their audiences, but don't have processes in place to gather information and feedback. While Great Valley's staff, parents and community members are seeking more information, they are also looking for ways to have their own opinions heard and valued. It will be important for the district to find ways to do this if it is to gain support and trust from its constituents.

Key Findings

Several common themes emerged from the focus group discussions and surveys.

Overall Perceptions of the Great Valley School District (not necessarily related to communications)

1. Most believed Great Valley is an excellent school district that especially offers opportunity for high-performing students. Numerous parents said they'd moved to the school district after researching several other districts in the region.
2. Many cited the size of Great Valley as a strength for the school district, appreciating its close community feel and accessibility.
3. Most groups – internal and external - said they weren't clear how or why most decisions were made, didn't feel as though they had a voice, and didn't have a clear sense of vision or direction for the school district.
4. There was clear frustration from both teachers and parents about communication between the groups: Parents felt that communication from teachers about student progress and expectations was very inconsistent and often insufficient; Teachers felt that parents' expectations were too high
5. Across all groups there was a sense of disconnection from the Great Valley School Board. Each group said it would like access to a brief summary of what is to be discussed at board meetings, decisions that have been made, etc., rather than having to read through lengthy meeting minutes or watch board meetings on TV.
6. Many feel that the district isn't doing enough to support its English as a Second Language population, and said it's concerned that the growing diversity in the school district is not something the district is prepared to handle.

Overall Communication Strengths

While this audit primarily contains information about areas in which the district can improve communications, it's important to also note there are several strengths from which work can begin and be used as a foundation for growth.

1. It is apparent that there is great pride in the Great Valley School District, and people are proud to say their children attend the schools here.
2. Most parents (83% district-wide and 90% in elementaries) said they feel informed about what's happening in their child's school and seem to value the district's teachers.
3. Most parents said they strongly prefer email and text messaging as a method of communication over other kinds of social media, which simplifies the district's mission (since email is easier to manage than many forms of social media.)
4. Parents and staff both said they were interested in hearing more from the Superintendent, so there's a great opportunity to capitalize on a captive, eager audience.
5. Snow delays/cancellations were frequently cited as things that the district communicates very effectively. Perhaps this is an example of how clearly-defined procedures and protocols have enhanced, improved, and streamlined communication in this instance. The same kind of efficacy might be achieved if standard processes can be put in place to communicate about other district issues, as well.
6. Parents overwhelmingly felt the front office staff at the district's elementaries and high school were very warm, welcoming, and helpful.
7. The "IN Great Valley" magazine that's mailed to residents four times a year is well read by community members and parents.

Overview of Communication Issues from Staff

**** (Survey and focus group summaries and data with more complete information are listed at the end of this report)**

1. Staff strongly felt that they aren't informed or involved in decision-making, and feel they "often have no idea in what direction the district is moving." They cited many recent changes (some of which they were supportive), and the lack of information they received about these changes. When asked how they learned about changes, they said they most often heard about them "through the grapevine" and then were informed via email or in a staff meeting either at the last minute or after the changes had been instituted.

“There’s too much word of mouth communication and too many rumors. No one knows what information to trust.” – Elementary teacher

“We are starving for direction.” – High school teacher

2. Staff would like a more collaborative work environment in which their viewpoint is sought and valued. Staff feel administrators don’t take time to adequately gather data or reflect on the ramifications of their decisions. They also feel decisions aren’t explained.
“There’s a grieving process in the middle school where we no longer have a say. We no longer have a voice, and no one is leading us.” – Middle school teacher
3. Staff feels there’s a disconnect between district administrators and building administrators, and that each building operates as a silo with its own set of rules and climate.
4. Staff feel administrators are not informed and don’t communicate well with employees.
5. Custodial and Support staff do not feel valued and feel they are not as informed as other members of the professional staff.
6. Support staff doesn’t have access to computers throughout the day and therefore doesn’t receive communication in a timely manner; They also feel they are rarely involved in decision-making.
7. Staff feel over-loaded by demands and feel they don’t have enough time to communicate. They also feel there are no clear guidelines regarding communication.
8. Staff feel the district lacks consistent procedures and expectations.
9. Staff feel parents often know about decisions before they do.
10. Staff want a one-page summary of what happened at School Board meetings, and an organizational chart/chain of command.

Communication Issues from Parents/Community Members

1. Parents and community members felt they wanted more involvement and transparency regarding district decisions. There is no clear sense of how or why decisions are made, and there is not a clear line of communication about the change process.
2. Parents are very frustrated with inconsistency in communication from teachers about their children’s academic progress. Many said teachers aren’t responsive to emails and phone calls, and don’t frequently enough update Skyward, the district’s online grade and homework management system.

3. Both groups would like more detailed information about activities, events, and programs in the schools.
4. Parents felt that the transitions from elementary to middle school and middle to high school were very disjointed and not well supported.
5. Parents and community members want a brief summary of what happened at school board meetings, and both would like more information about the budget process.
6. Parents feel communication from athletic programs is often inconsistent and poor.
7. Parents and community members want to see more support for non-English-speaking families.
8. Both groups would appreciate a simple, district-wide email newsletter
9. Parents would like the website to be reorganized and updated more frequently
10. Parents would like more parity in culture and communications among schools

Recommendations

This report contains more recommendations than can be accomplished in a single year. It is recommended that the district identify target areas to address each year, and build them into a Strategic Communications Plan.

Recommendation 1: Improve and strengthen internal communication.

Employees who are informed and involved function more effectively and are more supportive of their district's efforts. The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts. When an issue emerges or when the district begins to communicate about a decision or issue, it's essential the communication process begins with staff. Staff members in the focus groups said they often feel "out of the loop" about decisions and are unclear about the direction and vision for the district.

Of the 476 staff members who responded to the survey:

- 51% feel the district clearly and effectively communicates information they should know to adequately do their jobs and be informed;
- 47% feel their opinion as an employee is valued;
- 53% feel supported by district office administrators;
- 55% feel confident and hopeful about the direction the Great Valley School District is heading.

The focus groups fully supported these numbers.

Increasing communication and involvement by staff should help to change this.

Suggestions for action include:

a. Involve staff in decisions that impact them.

Staff morale often hinges on whether they believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions are made, staff can be involved in the process from the beginning of discussion. Administrators can solicit their input via committees, surveys, focus groups, etc. It's important to explain to staff that sometimes decisions must be made without consulting staff. However, with major decisions that will have a significant impact on staff, it's important to find ways to incorporate them in the process.

One staff focus group participant said, "We are the ones who have to live with these decisions and make it work, but we're never consulted or asked – or even told what's happening. We are treated like children."

When administrators are preparing to present changes and initiatives to the school board, it's important to prepare a plan to involve and communicate with staff about the decision, its timeline, etc. While gathering input may slightly extend decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and ultimately pride and performance.

It's important to note that most school administrators under-communicate. Because they are so intimately involved with their decisions and processes, there's the tendency to assume that if they've talked about an important change or initiative once or twice, or sent out a memo, that people have 'heard.' Research shows it takes multiple communications for someone to truly absorb a message. Many employees, including teachers, are so laser focused on their classroom work and the details of their own responsibilities (interfacing with students, parents, etc.) that they sometimes 'miss' some of the district-wide news.

It's recommended that any major decision that impacts staff should include a staff committee to provide input. Administrators must be willing to adjust course based on that feedback. One focus group member said, "Sometimes we have a voice, but we never have a vote." In order for any initiative to truly be successful, staff must be able to influence its implementation with regards to how it impacts them.

b. Administrators should plan to present key messages in multiple ways and multiple times, perhaps archiving information on the district's website and then referring to it in future communications.

In multiple focus group sessions staff said that if they missed a meeting, they then missed critical information and there was really no way to obtain it. They were concerned about the many different versions of information regarding changes and initiatives, and were eager for some official source of information. Several suggested that each meeting be followed up with a handout/email summarizing what was covered. This is particularly helpful for staff members who may miss the meeting for any number of reasons.

Other staff members said they are frustrated by the fact that timely information is only delivered in email, while their jobs keep them away from a computer during the day. Others said they are almost never included in staff meetings and feel 'out of the loop' because of it.

c. Increase face to face communication with staff

Many employees in focus groups said they felt disconnected from administrators, and repeatedly said "lack of visibility" was an issue. Research by the National School Public Relations Association shows face-to-face communication is almost always preferable when it comes to effective staff or

parent communication, and employees in Great Valley reflected this in their comments.

It is recommended that the district develop a schedule to get district office administrators including the Superintendent and cabinet-level administrators into the schools on a rotating basis. It's also recommended district office administrators regularly attend school staff meetings to stay connected with the tone of the buildings.

d. Work to improve the exchange and flow of information between school buildings.

Consider trying to include more opportunities for staff from different schools to occasionally meet and work together and for building principals and assistant principals to meet more frequently (or perhaps share more information about what's happening in their buildings.)

e. Implement a district-wide internal newsletter/memo (consider a biweekly or monthly simple format – simply bullets, etc.) that includes information about curricular changes, events, activities, issues, etc. in the schools as well as district-wide issues.

f. Work with custodial, food service, and support staff to better strengthen communication and involvement in decision-making. Increase efforts to include them in staff meetings. Administrators should meet with these groups on a regular basis to solicit their input and feedback and talk with them about how best to support them in their work and ensure they are receiving adequate information.

g. Establish a District Staff Communication Council/Superintendents Advisory Council

Bring employees of each type (support staff, teaching staff, etc.) together for a minimum of four times a year to meet with the superintendent and other district administrators to discuss district initiatives, progress, positives, concerns, etc. This would be an excellent opportunity to open the flow of communication between district office and the schools. Minutes from these meetings should be shared with the entire staff shortly after the meetings.

It's important that other administrators are included in this meeting since one of the main concerns from staff is that administrators aren't informed and don't communicate.

h. Post district goals in multiple places in each school.

This is one way to begin to get all staff focusing on the same goals and understanding that the district is moving forward, together, toward common

goals. Just over half the staff said they feel hopeful about the district's goals and vision.

- i. **Establish an employee recognition program**
Work with union membership and other staff leaders to identify and recognize employee accomplishments and achievements. Consider getting a local business to donate gift certificates, monetary donations, etc. for a recognition program that would honor one or more employees in each building who go "above and beyond" each year.
- j. **Establish an employee feedback/suggestion program**
Create ways – electronically or on paper – that employees can make suggestions for improvements at the building and district level. (Either a traditional suggestion box or an electronic mailbox; Consider options for anonymous suggestions/feedback.)
- k. **Annually repeat the communication survey used to develop this report, and work with the Superintendents Advisory Council or Communications Advisory Council to add or delete questions.**

Recommendation 3: Establish expectations for communication between teachers and parents

At the elementary level, 83% of parents who responded to surveys said they were satisfied with the communication from their child's teacher (Charlestown Elementary: 92%, General Wayne Elementary: 85%, K.D. Markley Elementary: 79%; Sugartown Elementary: 77%.)

At Great Valley Middle School just 54% said they were satisfied with communication with teachers, while only 39% said teachers let them know right away when their child was struggling.

At Great Valley High School, less than half of parents who responded (47%) said they were satisfied with communication from teachers, while only 32% said they were notified when right away when their child was struggling (33% said they were not.)

National research shows that the communication parents care about most is that direct communication from teachers, and that the information they want most is about their child's academic progress and how to help their child.

Great Valley's survey data clearly supports that: Parents said the two things they most was more information about is the academic progress of their child (84%) and

information about how to better help them academically (82%.) It should be noted that 82% also said they want more information about happenings in their child's school.

Clearly in a school district that is sought after for its academic reputation, a focus on communication surrounding academics is paramount.

Suggestions for action include:

- a. Share this survey data with teachers.** It's recommended that the superintendent and other administrators join with building-level administrators to meet with teachers in each building to discuss this issue in small groups. It's important for administrators to be cognizant of the demands placed on teachers and the additional time requirements for increasing communication.
- b. Develop a parent/teacher advisory committee to discuss this issue so both sides can work collaboratively to develop solutions.**
- c. Work with the union leadership and staff members to establish reasonable communication guidelines that can be implemented (and shared) district-wide with parents.** Examples include: Teachers will respond to emails within 24 hours; Urgent matters should include a phone call to a teacher; Teachers will keep their websites and grading sites updated; Teachers will include a list of ways parents can help their children and how to proceed if they feel their child needs additional help.
- d. Administrators and a communication professional can work with teachers to promote more proactive communication with parents throughout the school year.** Perhaps guidelines can be established along with the teacher's union and templates can be provided to make classroom-to-home communication simple and standardized.
- e. Provide training for teachers and work with teachers on establishing best practices for parent/teacher conferences and back to school night** as these are often the key times teachers and parents get a chance to have face-to-face interaction and to establish a relationship and rapport.
- f. Share any changes/new guidelines with staff and parents in multiple ways – in person, written, website, email, etc.**

Recommendation 3: Redesign the district website to make it more useful, informational, and easier to navigate, and incorporate a common, searchable calendar.

Many parents and staff members felt the website is not well organized and were eager for a redesign. Many school districts across the region and nation are going through this process. As our world has seen dramatic, technological advances in the last few years and as nearly all businesses have developed an online presence, parents, students, staff, and community members expect more from their school district's website.

Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Conduct several brief focus groups to determine what each audience would like to see in a new website: Which features are most important, which information is missing, how best should information be organized, etc.**

Focus group participants and survey respondents cited a lack of information about school activities and sports (including schedules, practice times, etc.) Many parents were also frustrated that many teachers don't maintain updated web pages.

- b. **Work with the district's website provider and use their resources to help develop a new design.**
- c. **Review websites from other school districts around the nation for ideas as to how best to design and organize a new site.**
- d. **Send a mock-up of the site to staff, parents, community, etc. for feedback before going live.**
- e. **Determine who will maintain and update each section of the website**

Recommendation 4: Improve communication from and with the School Board of Directors

76% of parents, 79% of community respondents, and 59% of staff said they'd like more information about School Board decisions. Each of the 12 focus groups agreed they'd like a one-page summary of school board discussion/action items to be emailed to them. Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Develop fact-sheets about initiatives and changes the Board is considering that include the description, reasoning, timeline, next steps, how to provide feedback, meeting dates, etc.**
- b. **Post board agendas and minutes on the website in a timely manner**
- c. **Develop a one-page summary of each board meeting to be emailed to staff/parents/community and post on the website**
- d. **Provide opportunities for Board members to visit schools and classrooms and attend more school functions and events.**

- e. **Host “Community Conversations” periodically with the Superintendent and other staff members, as well as a board member, to provide an opportunity for the community/parents to discuss issues outside of a School Board meeting.** When issues of importance to the community arise, many people become frustrated by the protocol a board meeting demands, including limits on speaking. This gives people a chance to have a voice and discussion in a more informal way.

Recommendation 5: Increase parent communication

Parents and community members agreed with staff: They want more involvement and transparency regarding district decisions. Many parents in focus groups said they don't have a clear sense of how or why decisions are made, and there's no clear line of communication about the change process.

At the same time, parents were sometimes frustrated with a lack of detailed information about activities, events, and programs in the schools.

Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Develop a district-wide e-newsletter and include information from the schools as well as district-level information** – This could be simple and include a few photos of students and be published on a monthly basis. Many districts in the region now offer this to parents and community members. It is emailed to all parents and staff, and community members are able to 'opt in' or sign up for the newsletter. It is archived on the district's website. Some districts send this out weekly or as-needed; It can be extremely simple and not require more than some bold headings and an occasional photo (view examples from Unionville-Chadds Ford, Downingtown, Radnor, West Chester, etc.)
- b. **Keep the district website updated with useful information.** (e.g. as of May, 2016, summer camp information was still listed for 2015 and
- c. **Develop a “State of the District” annual presentation and report**
This can be emailed to parents and shared online.
- d. **Develop a “Key Communicator” Group** – This is a program used very successfully in school districts nationwide. A Key Communicator Group is a network of people who are well connected to both the school and community, and agree to meet a handful of times a year (even twice) to share information. The emphasis is on two-way information; The Group receives emails about issues/changes, etc. and agrees to report to administrators if they hear 'buzz' in the community about an issue.

e. Bring principals together to share ideas of what has worked with regards to communication in their buildings.

Based on Focus Group discussions, some buildings are excelling with regards to parent communication and involvement while others are struggling. Many parents and staff members felt the 'inequity' of the culture differences and communication protocols from buildings to building.

Recommendation 6: Develop a District-wide Communications Plan that includes a crisis communications component.

This is one of the strategies under Goal #5 in the district's strategic plan (Ensure systems are in place that engage families, business partners, and community members in the student learning process and communicate with stakeholders in ways that promote, enhance, and sustain a shared vision for building a positive school climate.)

Any plan should include timelines and staff members responsible for completion. This Communications Audit provides a foundation for developing a Communications Plan. Essentially the recommendations contained in this plan can become goals and action items in a plan. Also, developing a crisis communications plan as a part of this process gives administrators a chance to think through potential scenarios and establish and review protocol with staff.

Recommendation 7: Create a standard practice to establish a communications plan for each significant district initiative or key issues as they arise.

It's recommended the district develop a communications plan for key issues. Each plan should incorporate answers to the following:

1. Who needs to know?
2. What do they need to know?
3. When do they need to know?
4. How will we tell them?
5. What do we want them to do with the information they receive?

Recommendation 8: Strengthen school-to-school communication

Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Provide more opportunities for principals to share information about what's happening in their buildings**, and to collaborate on events, projects, and communications. Sharing building newsletters and visiting each other's schools from

time to time would provide a broader perspective of what's happening across the district.

- b. Provide more opportunities for staff at different levels to collaborate and share information.**

Recommendation 9: Provide more opportunities for administrators and school board members to be more visible in the district's schools and at school functions

Suggestions for action include:

- a. **Administrators should discuss as a team a plan that allows them to spend more time in the buildings;** Perhaps a rotating schedule of building visits.
- b. **Superintendent should consider hosting some 'coffee with the superintendent and/or school board' meetings (even if few people show up, it's important to make the gesture and provide accessibility) and create a schedule that allows more visibility at school functions, events, etc. as well as in classrooms.**

Recommendation 10: Provide communications training to administrators and other staff members

Communication training would help the administrative team (building and district-wide) to operate with the same guiding sense of communication guidelines, and would give them a chance to discuss emerging communication issues.

Staff at all levels should receive some basic level of training. For teachers, training could focus on home-to-school communications and parent relations. For administrators, overall communications training as well as help developing newsletters would be helpful.

Recommendation 11: Establish communication guidelines and expectations for administrators.

It was apparent in the focus groups that there seems to be no clear process for internal communication, and information is often shared in an inconsistent and sometimes disorganized manner. Administrators should clearly understand their roles in communicating key information in a timely manner and be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. A communications component can be included in administrators' evaluation criteria.

Key Messages and Frequently Asked Questions should be developed for each issue. Both can be distributed to staff members so they fully understand the reasoning and timeline for initiatives.

Recommendation 12: Strengthen communication with non-English-speaking families in the district.

Suggestions for action include:

- a. Explore best practices and communication outreach programs in other school districts with growing ESL populations.**
- b. Host a “Family Café” patterned after Kennett Area Consolidated School District’s program.** (Spanish speaking families are invited to a monthly meeting to talk about a variety of issues concerning youth (social media, drug and alcohol prevention, etc.) and the district is able to share important information.)
- c. Create opportunities for non-English-speaking families to get additional help/support for their children who may be struggling.**

Recommendation 13: Explore ways to improve the transition from elementary to middle school and middle to high school

Suggestions for action include:

- a. Work with a team of parents, students, and administrators to determine where the gaps in the transition exist.**
- b. Develop ways to improve the gaps by providing better connection and communication between the levels**

Recommendation 14: Refine the use of GVTV

Analyze the current use of this powerful communications vehicle and consider the involvement of students and other staff members in documenting district events and providing meaningful programming. Consider evaluating the way other school districts of similar size manage their television stations and programming.

Recommendation 15: Evaluate the district's use of social media

While only 14% of parents said they would like to receive information about the school district via social media, 33% said they would like to receive text messages with important announcements and information. Perhaps text messaging is an area the school district can look at expanding.

Most technologically-advanced school districts have at least a minimal social media presence. However, given the need to focus on parent/teacher communication and internal communication, it's recommended that Great Valley not make social media a priority at this time.

Recommendation 16: Strengthen outreach to the Great Valley community

Like most school districts, Great Valley struggles to find ways to reach its community members who no longer have children in the school district. The "IN Great Valley" magazine seems to be a powerful and well-read way to reach community members, but according to surveys, word of mouth is still the most powerful and effective way for this group to receive information. This is difficult to harness and manage, but an active group of community members that meet regularly with the district can help disseminate information.

Community surveys also showed that this group is best reached with mailings to their home. Perhaps the district can find special ways to engage community members throughout the year by specifically inviting them to performances, concerts, etc. and offering discounted or free admission. Based on survey data, it also appears this group might attend a 'state of the district' presentation featuring students talking about their work.

In surveys,

- 79% of respondents said they would most like information about school board decisions
- 57% were interested in the the academic progress of students
- 51% were interested in school district goals
- 41% said they wanted to know about operations of the district (including staffing changes, etc.)
- 40% said they wanted to know more about projects and programs Great Valley students are completing.
- 29% wanted to know more about school sports schedules, dates for performances, etc.

- 18% were interested in ways to be involved in the schools

It appears this group would like information and access, rather than volunteer opportunities

Recommendation 17: Continue to promote and grow the Education Foundation

Most school districts rely on their education foundations to fund extra programs, materials, etc. Foundations provide a valuable source of funding at a time when public school districts are forced to fight for every dollar.

Recommendation 18: Evaluate the Communication Office's goals and responsibilities

Using the data gathered in this communications audit, it's recommended the Superintendent and Director of Communications and Outreach work collaboratively to develop goals and project timelines. It's important to note that the communications office is a very important part of the school district. The office should be able to facilitate and support the district and its staff in improving communications. However, many of the communications challenges outlined in this audit come from an internal lack of focus on clear communication rather than any lack of attention from the communications office. In order to improve communications district wide, all administrators and eventually all staff members must take responsibility for personal and even district-wide communications. Each staff member must own a piece of the communications puzzle and work collaboratively to develop a new culture that supports and values proactive, clear, effective communication. That also must start with the Superintendent's office.

Appendix 1 - Summaries of Surveys

Staff Communication Survey

Staff Surveys – 476 staff members out of a possible 664 - 71% response rate

- 98% know who to go to with questions or concerns in the district
- 81% would like to see an an internal newsletter for staff, summarizing district information, changes, updates, etc.
- 55% feel confident and hopeful about the direction in which the Great Valley School District is heading
- 53% feel supported by district office administrators
- About 51% of staff feel the district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information they need to know to adequately do their job and be informed
- About 47% feel their opinion is valued
- 43% feel they have adequate and useful training for most new procedures

Staff say the ways they are most likely to receive information:

1. Email (59%)
2. Website (38%)
3. Other staff members (33%)

79% say email is the best way to reach them, followed by a staff meeting and paper in their inbox

Staff most want **more** information about:

1. Decisions about daily operations – including staffing changes, procedures, etc. (76%)
2. School Board decisions (59%)
3. Things happening in other buildings (53%)
4. District goals (33%)
5. Academic progress of students (28%)
6. Projects and programs our students are completing (27%)
7. District finances (21%)

Summary of Comments from Staff Survey

1. Administrators at building and district level should be more responsive and respond in a timelier manner.
2. Some information is communicated via meetings but not followed up with email; Others is only communicated via email. Both methods are necessary to ensure everyone gets the message.
3. Need more proactive information early in the change process, during, and after the change.
4. Building level and district level administrators should communicate more clearly to avoid confusion and mixed messages
5. Parents often know about things before staff does.
6. Overall climate/tone/morale needs to be improved
7. Need more consistency in all communication
8. Building-to-building communication is lacking
9. Administrators should seek more input from teachers and staff – need more collaborative decision-making
10. Administrators should explain decisions to staff so staff can better support them
11. Need more support for all ELL families – not just those who speak Spanish
12. Support staff should be able to meet with superintendent a few times a year
13. Departments need to share more information
14. Administrators need to do a better job communicating about the district goals and vision
15. Administrators don't seem to have any answers
16. There are many unclear expectations

Parent Communication Survey

Parent Surveys – 786 parents out of a possible 1,891 families responded – 41% response rate

- ❖ 87% say they read the “IN Great Valley” magazine
- ❖ 84% feel the district as a whole clearly and effectively communicates information they should know
- ❖ 77% feel informed about what's happening in the school district
- ❖ 62% are hopeful and confident about the direction in which the district is heading
- ❖ 59% say they know who to go to with questions/concerns
- ❖ 57% feel their opinion as a parent is valued
- ❖ 56% feel the district embraces all families of different cultures and ethnic groups
- ❖ 51% are satisfied with the amount of positive news about Great Valley schools that appears in the local newspapers (43% neutral)

- ❖ At the elementary level, 83% of parents who responded to surveys said they were satisfied with the communication from their child's teacher
 - Charlestown Elementary: 92%

- General Wayne Elementary: 85%
 - K.D. Markley Elementary: 79%
 - Sugartown Elementary: 77%
- ❖ At Great Valley Middle School just 54% said they were satisfied with communication with teachers, while only 39% said teachers let them know right away when their child was struggling.
 - ❖ At Great Valley High School, less than half of parents who responded (47%) said they were satisfied with communication from teachers, while only 32% said they were notified when right away when their child was struggling (33% said they were not.)

Overwhelmingly, the front office staff at almost every school was identified as being warm and welcoming – some achieved very high ratings, particularly at the high school.

Parents want more information about:

1. Academic progress of their child (84%)
2. How to better help their child academically (82%)
3. Happenings in their child’s school (82%)
4. School board decisions (76%)
5. District goals (74%)
6. Projects and programs students are completing (73%)
7. Ways to be involved as a parent at the school (60%)
8. Decisions about daily operations at the schools including staff, procedures, etc. (59%)
9. Sports schedules, results, etc. (58%)
10. Things happening in all of the schools, not just their child’s (37%)
11. The Education Foundation (26%)
12. Other (20%)

Parents say the way they would most like to receive information from the district is:

1. Email (94%)
2. Website (68%)
3. Papers sent home with their child (39%)
4. Text messages (33%)
5. District newsletters (29%)
6. Phone calls (26%)

❖ *Only 14% listed Facebook and 1% listed Twitter*

Currently, the place parents are most likely to go to for information is:

1. Website (65%) – *likely includes Skyward*
2. Email (56%)

3. Their child (27%)
4. Phone calls (20%)
5. Other parents (12%)
6. GVSD employees (10%)
7. Facebook (8%)
8. GVTV (4%)
9. Twitter (4%)
10. Newspapers (3.5%)
11. Board meetings (3%)

Summary of Comments from Parents Survey

1. Parents are very frustrated that teachers don't consistently update their websites and Skyward, and that they are not always responsive to parent emails and phone calls
2. Parents overwhelmingly would like teachers to reach out more proactively when a student is struggling
3. Parents would like to receive text messages and not just emails/phone calls
4. Parents feel the transition to middle school is difficult and there isn't enough communication and support around it
5. Parents would like to hear more frequently from the superintendent
6. Parents would like a district-wide newsletter
7. Parents feel communication from athletic programs is often inconsistent and poor
8. Parents want more involvement and transparency regarding district decisions

Community/Resident Communication Survey

Summary of survey responses: 189 out of a possible 4,500 households contacted via postcard - .04% response rate

- 94% feel the quality of the school district directly impacts their property values
- 87% read the "IN Great Valley" magazine
- 60% feel the schools are clean, neat, and welcoming
- 49% are satisfied with the amount of positive news the district receives in local papers (39% neutral)
- 43% feel hopeful and confident about the direction in which the district is heading (46% neutral)
- 39% feel the district clearly and effectively communicates information they should know
- 34% feel informed about what's happening in the district

The information residents would most like:

1. School Board decisions (79%)
2. Academic progress of students (57%)
3. District goals (51%)
4. Decisions about daily operations including staffing, etc. (41%)
5. Projects and programs students are completing (40%)
6. Sports schedules, results, dates for performances, etc. (29%)
7. Ways to be involved in the schools (18%)
8. The Education Foundation (15%)
9. Alumni events (12%)

“Other” was listed at 13% and most comments included budgets/taxes/financial information (Some may have believed this was covered under School Board decisions, as was the intention of the survey)

The places residents are most likely to go to for information about the district:

1. Website (48%)
2. Other residents (18%)
3. Newspapers (18%)
4. School newsletters (14%)
5. School Board meetings (9%)
6. Emails/phone calls from the district (8%)
7. GVSD employees (7%)
8. Facebook (6%)
9. GVTV (4%)
10. Twitter (3%)

The places residents would most like to receive information:

1. Mailings to their home (41%)
2. Website (40%)
3. Email (35%)
4. Newspaper articles (28%)

Summary of Comments from Community Survey

1. Community members would like more information about:
 - How the district conducts business
 - Budget information
 - How the district saves money
 - How students are doing academically
 - What kinds of academic programs are available

- What kinds of projects the students are completing
2. Residents would like more invitations to school events, for school tours, etc.
 3. Some residents suggested a monthly email to community members, possibly including a teacher spotlight
 4. Some residents feel Great Valley should promote community service projects and give citizenship awards
 5. Some residents were concerned about typographical errors in materials

Appendix 2 - Summaries of Focus Groups

Elementary Teachers Focus Group

Number in attendance: 22

Overall perception of the school district: This is a very pleasant place to work, but communication is not consistent across all the buildings. Teachers are most happy with communication at the buildings but feel very disconnected from district-level administrators.

Themes

1. Some principals do an excellent job asking for staff feedback and listening to it. (e.g. Principal at Sugartown Elementary solicits feedback at the end of every year on what has done well and what has not and what should be changed for the following year. As a result, dismissal procedures were changed to eliminate hallway bottlenecks.) (e.g. New principal at K.D. Markley is very approachable and will talk through problems with staff without judgement.)
2. Teachers who travel from one building to another miss important information that is only spoken verbally in meetings, etc. Teachers would like minutes or notes from meetings emailed to them. However, they understand the time constraints of adding yet another 'to do' to administrators' plates.
3. Teachers would like one consistent place to go to for information and expectations. *"Information delivery is very choppy and so different from administrator to administrator."* Teachers said SharePoint is confusing and has too many drives, folders, etc.
4. With regards to parent communications, teachers feel as though they are somewhat over-communicating. *"Parents are very demanding and we don't have the time or opportunity to give them everything they want. We don't have time to teach if we are constantly responding to them."* There is a strong sense that administrators support parents over teachers, and that parents automatically go to district office if they are dissatisfied.
5. Staff feel over-loaded by demands and don't feel they have enough planning time. They would like more clearly-defined expectations for what and how they are to communicate.
6. Staff has no sense of district goals or vision. They also don't feel they have any sense of what is happening across grade levels throughout the district, and sometimes within their own buildings. *"I don't even know what the teacher down the hall is doing."*

7. Staff would like more collaboration time.
8. Staff feel there are a lot of decisions being made and that they are confused about what is being decided and why.
9. Staff feel the district lacks procedures, and if one person leaves, there is no way for their replacement to understand what that person did or was responsible for. This is indicative of an un-collaborative culture in which people don't communicate about responsibilities.
10. Teachers would like more information about K-12 articulation. *"We guess at what the kids need to know for 6th grade."*
11. Teachers don't have enough support to implement 504 plans and IEP's.

Specific Suggestions:

- Increase communication between buildings and with district office
- Staff would like more emails detailing decisions, changes, procedures, and protocols
- Curriculum meetings should be more inclusive of all staff
- Staff would like board meeting summaries emailed to them
- Increase face to face meeting time
- Teachers would like to see Superintendents Advisory Council reinstated
- Improve the way in which staff is notified about being moved to a different buildings; Deliver that information in a kinder, gentler manner
- District office administrators should be more responsive and answer emails and phone calls in a timely manner

Secondary Staff Focus Group

Number in attendance: 18

Overall perception of the school district: Staff enjoys working in the district and feels it is full of talented, dedicate staff and wonderful students. There are plentiful resources and it's a nice place to be. The small size of the district is a positive attribute. The group immediately cited communication as one of the district's biggest challenges.

During this 1.5 hour session, the staff's strong feelings about the lack of communication surrounding curriculum changes heavily dominated the conversation. The group was irate that they felt they weren't consulted about the changes.

Themes

12. There is a general sense of lack of communication to staff.
(e.g. One teacher received an email in October about the communication focus group but then didn't hear anything until he put in for a sick day and found he was scheduled for the session in January.)
"There's too much word of mouth communication and too many rumors. No one knows what information to trust."
13. Staff feels the websites are strong but the district should start to use social media.
14. There's been a decline in morale over the last 10 years.
"Because things have been so difficult lately, I can honestly say I'm just not as happy to see my students as I used to be, and that is sad."
15. Staff does not have any kind of sense of the district's goals or vision.

(e.g. *"It's not nearly as collaborative a work environment as it was when I started 10 years ago. There's been too much turnover among the administration and things are getting lost. Decisions are made without consultation of staff and they don't take time to really gather data or reflect on the ramifications of their decisions."*)
16. There's a general sense that district office doesn't know what's going on in the buildings, and vice versa.
"The administration gives different information to different groups, and much of the information is 'whisper down the lane.'"
17. Staff feel decisions are made without regard to how they will impact other departments, staff, classrooms, etc.
"I feel like what I say to my principal falls on deaf ears."
"There's a grieving process in the middle school that we no longer have a say. But, we are also starving for direction. There are lots of tears among the staff. We no longer have a voice, and no one is leading us."
18. The pace of change is too fast. (Staff suggested administrators ask teachers: "How could we make this work?" instead of forcing it upon them without consultation.)
19. Staff wants more K – 12 communication and collaboration since what happens at one level impacts the next.
20. Staff would like more explanation about decisions and help understanding the data driving the decisions.

"We used to be given pounds of information and data, and now we have no idea why decisions are made or what's behind them."

"We have a voice, but not a vote. So we just hunker down in our classrooms and make it work."

"I'll ask a question seven or eight times and still not get an answer. It's either avoided or just ignored. It's very frustrating."

21. In-service days are extremely poorly organized and managed.

"They used to be phenomenal, but now they are a complete joke. If we ran our classrooms like they run in-service days, we'd be fired."

22. English as a Second Language students (and parents) need significantly more support.

Specific Suggestions:

- More staff meetings at the high school to discuss issues/changes
- Bring back middle school staff meetings
- More face time with the superintendent; Don't feel superintendent is listening to them
- Would like to see more administrators in their buildings; Feel administration is very disconnected
- Department chairs should have more time with district office administrators and then be given a chance to disseminate information to staff
- New superintendent should have spent more time observing rather than making major changes in year one
- Teachers need more time to complete their work. "We're given more requirements but there's never a discussion about how we're supposed to do it, or when."
- Would like a one-page email summary of School Board discussions/decisions
- High school administration should not make decisions regarding staff based on the performance of one or two staff members

Custodial/Food Service Focus Group

Number in attendance: 9

Overall perception of the school district: It's a great place to work, live, and educate your children. Great Valley is full of very friendly, civic-minded people and it's a very positive atmosphere. "There's lots of caring that goes on here."

Themes

1. Despite enjoying working in the district, the Support Staff does not feel "well informed" about what's happening.
"There are too many people telling you so many things that just aren't accurate."
2. There's a lack of consistency in information given to support staff.

3. Support staff are usually informed via email, which they say is the worst way to reach them because they are working in the buildings, without access to a computer. They'd prefer phone calls and face to face meetings.
4. Support staff is informed about decisions 'after the fact' and aren't ever asked to have input.
5. Administrators and teachers have no idea what demands Support Staff is facing.
"Our jobs are very stressful. There's two of us and 1,200 kids and 150 teachers, and they all want something at once."
6. One of our primary roles is to create the atmosphere that allows them to teach; We are surrogate parents and not just custodians.
7. Would like more consistency in how support staff is informed about informational and 'big picture' items
8. We aren't deemed as important as teachers; We are stereotyped and some teachers don't respect us. (e.g. a teacher bumped a support staff member out of a parking spot, saying, 'Well I'm a teacher.')

Specific Suggestions:

- If teachers or administrators need something, put the request in the subject line of an email.
- "Issue Track" is not helpful because there are too many extra steps; It's very cumbersome
- The school board-designed 'temperature zones' often make things blatantly uncomfortable in the buildings since some buildings have warmer or colder wings; We'd like flexibility to adjust
- Mandate that fire drill instructions be posted in one consistent place in each elementary classroom
- Would like more autonomy to do their job
- Need more internet access in the buildings so that sites aren't blocked (Needed to look up schematic, nape of a pipe, etc. and wasn't able to get online to the proper site to do it.)

Support Staff Focus Group

Number in attendance: 14

Overall perception of the school district: Great Valley is a great place to work. Colleagues are very nice and competent, and there is a wonderful connection with the students. There is a great sense of pride in the school district.

Themes

9. Monthly staff meetings are extremely helpful and it's important to include support staff; Need a way to be informed about what happened in those meetings (email notes to support staff, etc.)
10. Staff needs a better sense of how their school/program fits into the larger district picture
11. At District office level, there's a breakdown in communication – and administrators don't think about how their decisions impact us.
12. Support staff doesn't have access to a computer all day, and would like notices delivered in paper via their mailbox (Currently word of mouth is the way they most often receive urgent information.)
13. Support staff gets information about changes too late; Communication always comes 'after the fact' and they aren't involved in decision-making. Often the word is out in the community before support staff is formally communicated with about it. *"We need to know everything to make things work well, but we are often the last to know."*
14. Support staff doesn't have a clear sense of the district's vision or goals
"We aren't allowed to attend the opening day presentation so we never get to see the superintendent lay out the plans for the year."
15. Would like to see a one-page summary of School Board discussions/decisions each month
16. When there are big changes we never get an explanation as to why these things are happening
17. Were not aware there is a district-wide newsletter
18. Don't have any sense of district goals or vision

Specific Suggestions:

- Bring back the Superintendent's Advisory Council - should be a mixture of support staff, teachers, other staff, etc.
- Make iPads, etc. more accessible for support staff to log in and check email to get notifications on urgent items (e.g. school is having indoor recess today)
- "Issue Track" system is too cumbersome
- Would like monthly staff meetings
- There should be a greater focus on multiculturalism in the schools

Administrators Focus Group

Number in attendance: 8

Overall perception of the school district: There are a lot of dedicated staff members and there's great pride in working in Great Valley. We are very student-centered and focused on student achievement. We are in a time of transition and change. Sometimes communication between non-instructional and instructional staff is lacking.

Themes

1. Change takes a lot of time in Great Valley. We have a culture of complacency because we have scored well.
2. We need to better define how we communicate – the standards are scattershot.
3. We do have a clear sense of district goals this year.
4. Information is primarily shared via email, but email isn't used enough after meetings to follow-up – so if you miss the meeting you miss the information.
5. There is a lot of 'whisper down the lane' in finding out what is happening (e.g. At the end of last year there was discussion of whether or not there would be a half day, and the students knew before we did.)
6. Staff will hear about initiatives that we're not quite ready to roll out (e.g. 1:1 technology)
7. There is much confusion about whether we are operating in a hierarchy or a collaborative culture.
8. Would like a summary of monthly board meetings.
9. Need to do a better job communicating with Hispanic population
10. District needs to do a better job gathering feedback then using it.
11. Teachers want more facetime with superintendent
12. Would like to see more positive news stories about the district in the newspaper

Specific Suggestions:

- Create and define protocols and expectations for communication for parents and staff (e.g. if you're having an issue with a teacher, what's the chain of command for parents so that they don't go straight to the superintendent.)
- Make the site that athletic programs use to post schedules easier to use
- Create clear and consistent expectations for teacher websites
- Bring back monthly elementary principal meetings and memorialize what happens in them and share that with other administrators
- Use the phone instead of all the email
- District needs to embrace technology and social media

Elementary Parents Focus Group

Number in attendance: 15

Overall perception of the school district: Good school district with great test scores. “Scores matter in how we select where we want to live.” Several parents said they moved into the district (from the region as well as from out of state) based on the quality of the GV School District. One parent who moved from New York said that even though scores are excellent, kids don’t seem as stressed out about tests as they did in her former school district.

How do parents find out information about the school district?

- Primarily through email from administrators (they appreciate proactive letters about things that happen in the district, and feel good about the handling of crisis situations)
- Would like the option to get text messages about important items
- Think the website is good, and use the online calendar and Skyward

Parents said email is the best way to reach them with detailed information; Would like text messages with reference to email for quick updates/reminders

Themes

1. There was a strong sense that the culture is distinctly different in each elementary school and that parents want more parity in communication and culture.
 - a. Some schools have a weekly newsletter while others do not.
 - b. At Charlestown, teachers have to work through a parent coordinator to get info out to parents and don’t have the option to email the entire class.
 - c. Charlestown culture is also much stricter/rigid (e.g. they don’t offer a Pajama Day while other schools do – translates to a lack of ‘fun’)
 - d. Schools vary in their policies regarding volunteering – some allow parents to bring younger siblings, some don’t, etc.
2. Parents also wanted more consistency in communication from teachers (some heavily communicate while others do not.) “Some years I know everything going on in the classroom while other years I feel like I don’t have a clue.”
3. One parent noted that she would like to be able to give her children advanced notice about things like fire drills, testing, etc.
4. Parents want more information about the curriculum.
5. Parents want more opportunities to volunteer (spots fill up quickly.)
6. Overall parents are very happy with the office staff and feel warmly welcomed.
7. Parents would like more time at Back to School night.
8. Parents would like a one-page summary emailed to them about what the School Board is discussing.
9. Would appreciate more work on making all information accessible to English as a second language families.

10. Would like the district to err on the side of providing too much information (would like more details – e.g. more explanation of MAPP testing, a detailed testing schedule, etc.)
11. Feel new superintendent is very proactive, involved and approachable
12. Parents were not aware the district has a newsletter and would like to have the link emailed to them.

Specific Suggestions:

- Would like Skyward to send a notice out to parents letting them know an assignment is missing
- Would like PTA to rotate morning and evening meetings to provide more access to parents
- Would like a “Second cup of coffee” program to allow parents to meet other parents after morning drop-off
- Would like nurse to fill out a form that goes home with a child when they visit the nurse
- Would like more information about middle and high school – “I’d like a better sense of K-12 continuity and to have a sense of where our kids are headed.”

Secondary Parents Focus Group

Number in attendance: 14

Overall perception of the school district: A high performing school district with hard-working, dedicated teachers. There are lots of opportunities for students to do many different things. Overall the students are very polite. Special education is not strong, however.

Themes

1. Special education is an area of weakness. Students aren’t identified early enough and parents have to aggressively fight to get them help and support.
2. Students are counseled toward college and not much else.
3. Overall parents prefer email communication but still like paper, as well. They feel social media is used best for communications about sports but not academics.
4. Athletic communication is greatly lacking. The Digital Sports page is inadequate and parents aren’t notified when there are changes in practice schedules and locations.

5. The school district does a good job communicating proactively in situations such as a suspicious car driving around the schools, etc.
6. Use of Skyward by teachers is extremely inconsistent, and teachers don't always notify parents when a student is struggling.
7. Communication from the high school and middle school is insufficient; Parents don't feel informed.
8. Parents feel the administration may be top-heavy
9. Information "dribbles out" about changes, initiatives, etc.

Specific Suggestions:

- Teachers should more consistently use Skyward
- Secretaries should be more aware of all after-school activities
- High school should have a monthly newsletter
- Parents want new superintendent to be more visible
- Back to School night at high school was poorly organized and lacked detail; Parents didn't have enough time and lost time looking for rooms (no map)
- Parents would like regular updates from school board about what they're considering

English as Second Language Parents Focus Group

Number in attendance: 3 (Parents from Asia, Iraq, and India)

Conversation in this focus group was slow and challenging because of the language barrier.

Overall, parents feel the district is very strong academically and is a warm, welcoming place. However, they struggle with the language barriers – for both themselves and their children.

How do parents find out information about the school district?

- Primarily through email and also from friends

Themes

1. ESL parents don't know where to go to get more information or more thorough explanations; They need a liaison they can call for help.
2. The schools are very warm and friendly
3. ESL parents want more information from the school district about how long it will take for their child to assimilate, as well as how long ESL support will be available.

4. ESL parents would like the school to do a better job fostering social connections between their children and English-speaking children.
5. Social media is not the best way to reach them with specific information.

Special Education Parents Focus Group

Number in attendance: 6

Overall perception of the school district: Mixed feelings – the district prides itself in being high performing and therefore children with learning differences aren't included in the broader school community and aren't necessarily valued.

Themes

13. Communication is very inconsistent and doesn't seem to have an overall strategy.
14. Crisis situations are handled well and communicated about in a thorough, proactive manner (outbreak of illness, lockdown, etc.)
15. Need more consistency in communication from teachers and parents – some teachers communicate well while others do not. (*"Last year my child was struggling the entire year and no one proactively communicated to help us, but this year has been great."*)
16. The district has had five years of incompetence with special education. New director of seems really good.
17. Elementary is generally helpful with special ed, then things fall apart in the middle school because teachers don't read IEP's, there are other issues, etc.
18. Special education students aren't always able to listen to the announcements and remember to sign up for things mentioned; There needs to be more thorough communication with parents to help them.
19. There is so much emphasis on honors and Advanced Placement, and 'average' or special education students are left behind. (*"You should be able to get through school as a B student with your self-esteem intact."*)
20. Case managers have too many students.
21. The transition from buildings (elementary to middle and middle to high school) is not positive or supportive.

Specific Suggestions:

- Special Education parents would like to meet regularly with Superintendent and Special Education Director – would like a regular parent group to meet about issues.
- Hold staff accountable
- Would like a one-page summary of what's happening at School Board meetings

- Would like to form a Community Advocacy Group to give parents more resources and to help them advocate for other special education parents and students.

High School Students Focus Group

Number in attendance: 14

Overall perception of the school district: Great Valley is an academically rigorous, good school district with a strong sense of pride, community, and positivity. Sports teams are strong, and there is very little negative energy.

Themes

23. The student body supports collective as well as individual accomplishments of its students (e.g. students support other student athletes.)
24. Guidance counselors are excellent and provide tremendous support to students with issues such as schedule changes and college planning.
25. Students have a strong voice (e.g. Students lobbied for a change in cafeteria cookies and felt as though their opinion was heard and valued.)
26. Students would like to get the same emails that their parents receive (e.g. info about practice SAT test was only sent to parents, and many students missed the information.)
27. High school website should be updated more regularly.
28. The district should better utilize social media, specifically Twitter.
29. The group discussed different apps/platforms for communication including “Remind Me” that would provide written access to morning announcements, etc. They would like to see some kind of written weekly update.
30. The transition from middle to high school is difficult and it’s clear that middle and high school teachers don’t communicate.
“One of my ninth grade teachers said, ‘Forget about everything they taught you in the middle school, because they didn’t teach it right.’”

Specific Suggestions:

- Bring back an ‘old school’ bulletin board to post written announcements, flyers, etc. in the school lobby so that all students could have access to it and wouldn’t have to worry about missing the morning announcements.
- One English as a Second Language student said he sometimes feels isolated because of the language and cultural barriers and wishes there was a way to build more bridges with English-speaking students.
- High school could improve scheduling to avoid conflicts between things such as a drama production and a football game.

- Provide more information about Great Valley alumni who have gone on to do great things; Connect GV students with GV alumni for internship opportunities.
- Website should include an updated list of GVHS clubs and activities.

Community Member Focus Group

Number in attendance: 6

Overall perception of the school district: Great Valley is a fantastic school district with a community that cares about others.

This focus group was comprised of community members who do not currently have children in the school district, and who do not work for the school district.

Themes

1. Most information about the district is disseminated by word of mouth. Community members do watch the TV station but feel it should be better utilized.
2. Community members like the district newsletter (feel it is well written and interesting) but would also like email updates about things happening in the school district. They'd like information about:
 - a. Taxes
 - b. The District's plans
 - c. Current events (sports, activities, concerts, etc.)
3. Feel there is too much of an emphasis on testing and comparing the district to others
4. Would like a monthly summary of School Board discussions and decisions emailed to them
5. Feel the website is comprehensive and very good; Some felt the district should better utilize social media
6. Would like to see the district pursue more positive publicity in the Daily Local and Inquirer (believe it builds pride and emphasizes property values)

Specific Suggestions:

- Find ways to better promote the district's science fairs, grandparents' days, concerts, plays, etc.
- Form stronger partnerships with the district's municipalities
- Develop a community list-serv that community members can opt into

School Board Focus Group

Number in attendance:

Overall perception of the school district: The district is comprised of two types of people: Those who are new to the district and view it as quickly rising, and those who grew up here and don't want to see change. The small size of the district (large geographical footprint but small population) is a real asset, along with the dynamic community. The school district is very strong, and the reputation attracts many move-ins.

Themes

1. We have done a complete turn-around with communication: We used to talk about everything but didn't say much. Now our communication has become more proactive and meaningful.

19. We need to be more consistent in what we say, and we need to be more responsive and get back to people in a timelier manner. Teacher and principal communication is "scattershot" and messages are inconsistent.
"You can talk to five different people and get five different versions of what is happening."

20. There is a lack of protocol and business etiquette – principals need training. We need to be more consumer-driven and place more value on each and every interaction. We need to focus more on 'customer service.'

21. "Word of mouth" is still a primary form of communication and there is a lot of "whisper down the lane" and turning to the rumor mill.

22. There is a need to better communicate with community members who don't have children in the district.

23. We should be doing more to use social media.

24. We should get back to people in a timelier manner.

25. Board members don't feel a one-page summary of board meetings/discussions would be well read or is worth investing time in compiling. The board believes many watch the board meetings on TV or online.

Beth Trapani – Communications Consulting

Beth Trapani is a school communications consultant who works with districts and schools around the region, helping them to better reach and interact with their many audiences. Her focus is on helping school districts build support, internally and externally, to strengthen their systems and provide more and better opportunities for students to succeed.

For years Beth was one of the Delaware Valley's most familiar voices and faces in her role as a morning anchor and reporter for KYW radio and for KYW and UPN-57 TV News in Philadelphia. She spent the first part of her career as a print and broadcast journalist, working at newspaper and radio stations across Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh's KDKA and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. In Pittsburgh she wrote a book about local ghost stories and graduated with honors from Carnegie Mellon University.

After leaving news, Beth transitioned to work in a Philadelphia public relations firm, using her media skills to help corporations such as Temple University Health System, the Kimmel Center, and Comcast, focusing primarily on crisis communications. She's been working with schools for the last 10 years.

Beth provides support to numerous school districts around the Greater Philadelphia region, and works with the Chester and Delaware County Intermediate Units to offer training and support for school administrators. She also provides training for Penn's Graduate School of Education's School Study Councils.

Her services include:

1. Support and guidance during crisis situations: developing communication strategies, shaping messages, communicating internally with staff and externally with parents and the community, and dealing with the media. Beth is available 24/7 and can respond quickly to help school districts address difficult situations and prevent them from becoming even larger problems.
2. Working with and teaching administrators and school boards to manage change, implement new initiatives, engage the community, and communicate both good and bad news
3. Training and mentoring administrators and other staff on a variety of communications topics
4. Communications audits and needs assessments to determine communication strengths, weaknesses, and areas for growth
5. Writing/editing key documents and speeches for websites, newsletters, etc.
6. Help explaining and disseminating complex issues such as test scores and budget data
7. Media coaching and training to help staff deal with the press
8. Development of communications plans that align with the district's strategic plan
9. Website editing and support services
10. Development of transition plans for incoming superintendents

A client list and more information is available at: www.TrapaniCommunications.com