

Communications Audit of the Poughkeepsie City School District November, 2005

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I. Introduction

Stephen Densmore and Smoke Signals Communications conducted a communications audit of the Poughkeepsie Central School District in May, 2005 and concluded this report in November, 2005. Throughout this period district administrators and staff from all levels cooperated fully, giving the auditor the insights necessary to provide constructive analysis and to propose meaningful recommendations for improvement. These recommendations are included at the end of each of the report's 13 sections and are meant to offer workable solutions—wherever possible without incurring new expense—to some of the district's communications concerns.

Each section explores a key component of the district's internal and external communications strategies with an eye toward determining where practice deviates from policy. It also seeks to identify gaps that might hinder constructive two-way communication or leave constituents uninformed. Through interviews with involved parties and extensive research, the auditor was able to develop a sense of what's working (and what isn't) in the district's communications infrastructure.

The Board of Education, Superintendent Watson and other district leaders are to be praised for recognizing the importance of information flow and community relations in addressing the significant challenges ahead. Over the last year, the district has engaged in a period of critical self-examination, completing a series of reports designed to assess and improve itself. Along with this Communications Audit, the district has conducted a Parent Survey and completed the Steering Committee Parent Involvement Report; the Rauhauser Survey of parents, teachers and administrators; and a review and rewrite of the District Policy Manual.

This audit utilizes research from all of the above-mentioned reports along with reviewing their findings from a communications standpoint. In addition, the auditor conducted in-depth interviews with more than 40 constituents, including Board of Education members, central administrators, principals, teachers, PTA officials, community leaders, union officials, parents, consultants and representatives from other districts. The company also completed an exhaustive study of district media relations, analyzing press releases and printed clippings for an entire year. And the district's website, handouts and publications were analyzed for relevancy and readability. Board of Education meetings and other district functions were attended and observed. A community survey was not conducted (as had originally been intended), with district officials preferring to wait until a later date; however, a promising agency—attached to the New York State School Boards Association—was identified that could perform the service affordably and reliably.

The result of this work is presented here in the sincere hope that it helps the Poughkeepsie City School District in its noble goal of educating and caring for Poughkeepsie's school children. The report represents a candid exploration of the district's communications strategies and practices. As such it encourages criticism and is intended for the use of the Board of Education, the Superintendent and central administration in crafting a strategic response. Stephen Densmore and Smoke Signals Communications stand ready to assist the district should it desire to enter the implementation phase discussed in its original proposal to the district.

II. Public Relations

A. Publications

The Poughkeepsie City School District and its nine schools produce an array of publications in any given academic year. From “Poughkeepsie Pride,” which is distributed by mail to all district households three times a year, to the “Smith School News,” which is delivered once a marking period by hand to parents and guardians of Smith Elementary students—these publications represent educators’ attempts to communicate in print with those beyond the walls of their buildings. It is an effort to inform unseen constituents of the activities, people, accomplishments and even educational philosophies found within the schools.

Given the fact that they are produced somewhat infrequently and, in some schools, not at all, we found it interesting that “newsletters” were listed as one of the top three ways parents received information about their children’s schools, according to the PCSD Parent Survey concluded earlier this year. Newsletters were listed as the most important source of information for high school parents (tied with “children”) and third most important source for parents of PMS and elementary school students. There may have been confusion among the respondents between building-generated newsletters and the district-generated Poughkeepsie Pride publication. Nonetheless, the response indicates that parents read (and rely upon) school publications in significant numbers.

Newsletters

The assumption behind publishing a newsletter is that the better informed constituents are, the more likely they’ll be to involve themselves in the educational process or to support district initiatives. That assumption may be challenged by those who see no measurable educational benefit from the production of regular newsletters, pointing out that they tax overburdened staff and stretch tight budgets.

The decision to produce (or not produce) newsletters is left to the building principals. Consequently, only a handful of district schools currently produce regular newsletters and they vary substantially in terms of frequency and quality. Only

Smith’s Sam Letterii and Poughkeepsie High School’s Robert Murphy report producing a newsletter at least once a marking period throughout the school year. Murphy’s newsletter “Principally Speaking” is a simple, but thorough listing of school activities and accomplishments with no graphics or photos that is printed on both sides of a single sheet of paper. Murphy said he receives “good feedback” on the publication from parents.

Other schools—such as Circle of Courage, PMS and Clinton Elementary—produce newsletters less frequently or “occasionally.” Warring Elementary, Columbus Elementary and Morse Elementary principals report that they do not publish newsletters.

One principal summed up the situation many face, saying budgetary impacts and union constraints made producing a regular newsletter challenging. Some principals who do not produce regular newsletters explained that they send many individual fliers and handouts home with students, making a newsletter somewhat superfluous. Others admitted that they haven’t made it a priority, but would if it became a clear district mandate to do so.

It is not clear what funding assistance may be available to support those principals who choose to produce newsletters. Most indicated that funding needed to come out of limited discretionary budgets. However, at a June 8, 2005 Board of Education meeting Compensatory Programs Director Dr. Helen Blankenship stated that certain federal funds were available and were being used to support the creation of newsletters within the various buildings.

Poughkeepsie Pride

The Pride is a publication blanket-mailed to all addresses within the district three times each year, with editions traditionally published in January, May and June. Produced by Nancy Miller of the district public relations office, the publication has been a regular district feature since its inception in the 1980s. Except for the May edition, which is devoted to providing voters with a summary

...Publications

of the proposed budget, *Pride's* content features numerous photographs of students and staff (most taken by Miller) along with short articles about district events, student accomplishments and school programs. It also offers a front page "Message from the Superintendent" that provides a general thematic introduction to the publication. "It is a vehicle to let the community know some of the good things happening in our schools. It also promotes student achievement and recognition," said Miller, describing the editorial "mission" of the publication.

However, some critics contend that *Pride* should strive to go beyond promoting the positive aspects of the district. As the only publication delivered to all district addresses, they say, it should be produced more frequently and offer more serious, explanative content. One involved parent said she looks forward to *Pride's* arrival in the mailbox because it "highlights so many positive things;" however, she thinks the publication should be expanded and include more of an effort to explain district news and initiatives to the public. A longtime community educational activist believes the publication is too "fluffy" and should, instead, contain more information useful to parents and taxpayers. Also, he stated, there should be more than three issues each year.

A review of recent *Prides* indicates that the publication contains little explanative or analytical text concerning district initiatives, despite the fact that many changes were under way—some of them quite controversial—at the times of publication. For instance the June, 2005 *Pride* makes no mention of the abolition of the pre-kindergarten program, the expansion to a full-day kindergarten schedule or the sixth grade restructuring initiative, all of which had been recently unveiled during the budget review process. It seems a golden opportunity to explain district thinking directly to the public—unfiltered by the media—was lost.

Also, the Board of Education and its members did not have a presence in the *Prides* reviewed. One might expect the district's elected representatives would be featured within the pages of a districtwide publication. And, the *Prides* reviewed contained little or no references to parents, either individually or as part of groups such as the PTA. This is surprising

given the district's stated effort this year to increase parental involvement.

Other District Publications

The district produces several other publications and required handouts throughout the year, mainly through the district Public Relations Office.

- The district Calendar of Events is produced every August in advance of the new school year. The Calendar lists all key district dates, vacations, testing times, holidays, and meetings (in very small type) with an attractive layout featuring a different photograph of students for each month along with an inspirational quote. The first several pages of the Calendar offer various informative briefs concerning policies and programs at the schools. Miller requests the information from administrators and principals prior to deadline, but finds that "the information is slow coming to me" and this sometimes compromises her print date for the publication, a key resource for district parents throughout the school year. The Calendar is distributed to students on the first day of school in September to be brought home to parents and guardians. Miller also issues a press release to announce its availability at the Central Office and it is mailed to "key stakeholders" within the community. The Calendar is also reproduced—and can be updated and/or corrected—on the district website.

- The district's Elementary School Parent and Student Handbook is produced annually and distributed to each elementary student in September. It provides useful information concerning school policies, such as absences, health matters, school lunches, emergencies, report cards and hours of operation. In addition, the district's code of conduct and FERPA notice are included within the back pages. Parents are asked to acknowledge receipt and review of the handbook by signing and sending a supplied coupon back to the school.

- Miller's office also produces a variety of pamphlets, such as periodic updates of the Magnet School brochure that describes the district's three magnet schools, their areas of specialty and how to apply. Also, the office compiles a High School Profile,

...Publications

updated annually, which is provided to prospective graduates to use in college applications.

- The Parents' Newsletter is produced by Helen Blankenship, director of the Office of Compensatory Programs. The single-page newsletter is published every two months and, according to Blankenship, is designed to meet a federal Title I parental involvement or notification requirement. Approximately 500 copies are produced and distributed to principals and ESL teachers for dissemination to students, who bring them to eligible parents. However, Blankenship concedes that not enough copies are being distributed to cover all parents eligible for the program. Also, despite its name, it is not clear whether the publication is designed to serve parents or educators. "It keeps my staff informed. It keeps my principals informed," Blankenship stated. Indeed, the Parents' Newsletter appears to meander editorially between content designed to enlighten parents and articles designed for educators.

- As referenced earlier in this section, the individual schools produce numerous single-page handouts and fliers designed to update and inform parents of events, schedule changes, policy reminders and activities. This appears to be a primary source of information for many parents. "The note that comes home in the backpack," one parent said, is what informs most parents of school activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

District publications, in all their various forms, must be viewed as a primary source of information for district parents. Parents report utilizing "newsletters" or some form of district publications as one of their top three resources for information concerning their children's schools (PCSD Parent Survey 2005), well ahead of other traditional sources of information such as newspapers, TV, friends or even principals. Also, the district website, while apparently gaining in popularity among district residents, still only claims about 800 distinct users each month—leaving thousands of other parents and stakeholders relying upon other sources for educational information. Therefore, a district trying to spark parental involvement and engage the community should consider its printed matter an essential link—not an

afterthought, as some have suggested.

Publications are only useful if: they are produced with regularity, their editorial content serves their readers' needs and they are distributed reliably. For instance, Poughkeepsie Pride is delivered reliably—via the U.S. Mail to all district households—but is it published frequently enough to be meaningful to its readers? By publishing its first issue five months into the school year, Pride may not be anticipated or relied upon by district parents. And, its lack of relevant information and explanative content regarding district policy—especially at a time when the district is undergoing major upheavals—may actually frustrate parents and stakeholders who are searching for answers. We are not suggesting that Pride's positive, feature-oriented content should be scrapped; to the contrary, such content is an important reassurance to the public that "good things are happening" in the school district. Instead, the publication ought to be augmented with other elements, such as commentary from the Board of Education, administrative explanations of new programs, PTA recruitment drives, etc.

Other existing publications should be reviewed using the above criteria to determine if they meet the district's and their readers' needs. Small changes in editorial content or distribution strategy may pay big dividends in terms of making these publications more vital to their readers.

As for newsletters, the district should explore their value as a vehicle for delivering building-based information to parents. (It should be pointed out that a comprehensive and reliably-produced newsletter could eliminate the need for many of the single-sheet fliers and handouts currently composed, printed and distributed individually by the schools.) If found to be of value, the district should consider a policy supporting institutionalizing newsletters and setting standards to be followed in each building. This would need to be followed with budgetary and technical support, possibly from the district printing office and the public relations office. Furthermore, educational software designed to ease the ongoing production of newsletters is available from several providers, including the U.S. Education Department, Microsoft and the Apple Learning Interchange.

...Publications

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Review its inventory of publications to determine their effectiveness in meeting district goals. Consider changes and upgrades, under appropriate budgetary constraints, that render its publications more meaningful to readers.
- 2) Analyze the “editorial mission” of the Poughkeepsie Pride. Consider increasing the number of issues published from three to five per school year. And, develop new elements within the publication designed to increase the visibility of the Board of Education, explain school policies and programs, and highlight parental involvement in education.
- 3) Explore the feasibility of publishing newsletters within each school building. If warranted and desired, make budgetary allowances and organizational accommodations to support newsletter implementation. Utilizing available software, create a common template for newsletters in all buildings so that staff need only “pour” editorial elements into the common shell during each publishing cycle. This would not only ease production, but would give a consistent “look” to district publications. Coordinate with the district public relations office, the district printing office and the mail room to achieve organizational efficiencies.
- 4) Utilize all publications, wherever possible, as vehicles for two-way communication by including clip-and-mail surveys, volunteer sign-up coupons and appropriate telephone numbers for those seeking more information.

B. District Website

In March, 2004, PCSD contracted with Stephanie Griffin to revamp its website, which was believed by many to be extremely outdated and insufficient to the task. Under the direction of Griffin, an IT professional consultant who once served as website manager for international retailer Calvin Klein, the district website has evolved into a capable vehicle for communicating with the district's many constituencies, including parents, teachers, students and the community at large.

Griffin reports that the site appears to be gaining acceptance among web-users in the community. During a June interview, she said the site had attracted an average of 800 "unique users" each month with an average of 20,000 individual "hits" or visits per month, indicating that users re-visit the site frequently for updates on district news and activities.

The development of the site remains a work in progress as Griffin continues to work with district administrators and staff (including Dwight Paine, Nancy Miller, Evan Panagiotopoulos and William Rhodes) to bring new "bells and whistles" on line while also serving as the site's de facto webmaster. As webmaster Griffin is responsible for placing new information on the site and she stated in October that district staff are becoming more accustomed to conveying information to her, utilizing a variety of methods including e-mails, faxes and "handing off" communications for inclusion on the site.

Some of the new innovations—such as ParentConnect and the Teacher Pages—have proven to be difficult births as the consultant (and administrators) encountered resistance and delay in their implementation.

Most of the school sites exhibit comprehensive profiles of the educational environment found in their buildings. Some even provide welcome dashes of personality, such as letters from the principals (Columbus, Smith, PMS and Circle of Courage), introductions to staff (Columbus and Smith) and Columbus' unique "Our Proudest Moments" section touting the school's academic achievements. The streaming photos of students

and teachers running across the top of each page represents a fine graphic touch that adds life to the pages. And the locator map and Map Quest link at the bottom of each school page is a helpful service.

Areas of Concern

Criticism of the overall website is generally spread over three areas: poor organization, lack of timeliness and misinformation. As to the latter, this auditor observed several instances where outdated and/or incorrect information resides on the site. (These items have since been corrected after they were brought to the attention of district administrators.)

Parents (and some educators) interviewed confided that they found the website difficult to navigate. While this is largely a subjective concern, it may be indicative of structural or organizational problems that might be addressed by retooling some aspects of the site. "There's a lot more information on it now. I still don't care for the organization of it," said one parent.

Perhaps the most significant criticism leveled against the site was its lack of timeliness in conveying important "breaking" information. Again, several parents complained that the site doesn't consistently provide up-to-date information concerning school closures, delays, schedule changes and, to a lesser extent, school activities. In addressing these criticisms, the webmaster recently installed a new feature, termed "Breaking News," on the site's home page. This is a positive development and shows the willingness of staff associated with the site to evolve to the needs of constituents.

Two-Way Communication

One of the web's greatest advantages is its ability to enable instantaneous two-way communication. The district took positive strides in that direction recently by asking for constituent feedback on the Poughkeepsie High School "Open Campus"

...District Website

matter under consideration at the Oct. 26 Board of Education meeting. Such surveys not only tap community sentiment on important issues, but they also give the public a sense of involvement in district affairs. Only the web offers such a low cost and immediate way to gauge public opinion. Similar features could be established on the "Parent Portal" page to build a pool of parent volunteers and improve PTA involvement or to gather taxpayer sentiment concerning budgetary initiatives or proposed building expansions. However, it is noted that nowhere on the site can a constituent send a specific e-mail to district officials or to the webmaster. Other districts' sites offer this feature.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The district's effort to build a high-quality website is commendable. It should be noted,

however, that this is a complex undertaking that will require some time to perfect given the sheer volume of educational material that must be carried in some form on the website. While it is not clear what percentage of the community has the means and opportunity to access the website consistently, initial tracking suggests that a significant number of parents, students and teachers are currently utilizing the site. That number will only increase as the site improves and becomes more vital to those constituents with computer access. However, their concerns must be heeded if true improvement is to occur. Finally, we must acknowledge that many—perhaps even a majority—of residents in this diverse community may not have ready access to computers in their households; as such, the website must be viewed as but one tool of the many needed to communicate effectively within the district.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Either appoint an in-house webmaster or designate a district staff member to serve as the district's sole liaison to the webmaster. With the district website still evolving, it may be appropriate, for a time, to maintain day-to-day operations of the website with its professional consultant. However, in order for the site to be viewed as reliable, important updates, cancellations and schedule changes need to find their way onto the website immediately after an administrative decision has been made. A district administrator should be appointed to insure that this information is conveyed to the webmaster. A "breaking news" window installed recently on the site's home page was a good first step.
- 2) Convene a small panel comprised of the webmaster, educators and parents to review the presentation of information on the site and explore ways of making it more palatable from a user standpoint.
- 3) Consider offering e-mail address links for district officials, board members and/or principals so that constituents can correspond with them directly. If this is believed to be too intrusive or unwieldy, then permit constituents to write e-mails to a "clearinghouse address" such as the district webmaster.
- 4) Review translation issues brought up in the "Communicating with Hispanic Families" section.
- 5) Appoint a district administrator to review the content of the site for accuracy on a periodic basis. That person should report necessary changes/corrections directly to the webmaster.
- 6) Upgrade all school profile pages so that they meet minimum standards.
- 7) Utilize the website, whenever possible, to gather feedback from the public and encourage parental involvement. Initiate surveys on matters of district debate (as done recently), use the Parent Portal to gather the names of parents interested in serving on committees or PTAs, and possibly host constituent chat rooms as a clearinghouse for ideas.

C. Other Opportunities

District studies indicate efforts to communicate to parents and taxpayers would benefit from a more personal approach. After reviewing the data and survey results, the District Steering Committee felt more face-to-face communication is needed, according to Assistant Superintendent Karen Markeloff. "People tend not to read, they tend to be more visual," she said, noting that the sense of the Steering Committee was that the district should utilize the public access cable stations more (as has been done in the past) to offer district information to the public. Markeloff agreed that the district's new Discovery Channel-sponsored television studio, opened at the Poughkeepsie Middle School in September, could prove to be a valuable resource for the production of such materials.

Regional Time Warner representatives said that, as a non-profit community organization, the district may produce programming that could be aired on the local public access station on a regular basis, even weekly. This offers the district a unique opportunity to produce its own programming and air it to the public, unfiltered. The synergy of offering teachers and students at Poughkeepsie City School District the ability to produce and air a regular public television show while simultaneously performing an important public relations function for the district seems too

good to pass up.

Additionally, district administrators and Board of Education members should take advantage of the several locally-produced television and radio talk shows that proliferate local air waves. These shows can be opportunities for public engagement to encourage support, interaction and volunteerism. Their hosts are often anxious to "book" new speakers.

Finally, the district should look to the New York State School Boards Association for help in measuring community perceptions regarding district initiatives. The Association's Heather Adams leads the "Community Connect" division that handles call-in surveys for school districts statewide. The surveys are tailored to the districts' specific needs and can be completed in a relatively short 4-6 weeks at a cost of approximately \$4,500—considerably less than other options.

It should also be pointed out that this study did not involve students as timing and a sense of district priorities dictated that the project be completed without their input. However, it is advisable to include an assessment of student perceptions—perhaps through an in-school and online survey—in the coming year. Such a survey could provide valuable insights and propose solutions for a host of district issues.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Explore the possibility of utilizing the Discovery Channel studio to produce a regular (weekly or monthly) informational television show to be aired on the Time Warner public access cable station.
- 2) Engage talk show hosts to include district representatives on local television and radio programs.
- 3) Consider performing a community opinion survey with the New York State School Boards Association that gauges public perceptions about the district and its initiatives.

D. Media Relations

1. Press Release Report

Data analyzed were 49 press releases and requests for media coverage produced and submitted between July 31, 2003 and June 24, 2004 by the Poughkeepsie City School District's Public Relations Office to local media. Data was broken into seven categories:

- Document Type: Press Release, Request for Coverage, Community Announcement (information sent to local non-profits and other community organizations, in addition to the media).
- School: Clinton, Columbus, Krieger, Morse, Smith, Warring, Circle of Courage, Poughkeepsie Middle, Poughkeepsie High, or District-wide.
- Subject Type: Event, Student/Staff Achievement, Procedural (food service, registration information, etc.)
- Subject: A brief description of the document's content.
- Event Date: If applicable.
- Date Submitted
- Contact: District Superintendent, Principals, Teachers, Third Parties, Public Relations Office.

Findings:

- Documents were generally well-written and free of errors.
- Contacts were generally appropriate to the subject matter. However, the public relations office was not always listed as a contact.
- The system of teachers and principals submitting forms requesting press releases to the public relations office appears much too passive. The majority (38%) of the 49 releases analyzed were school and district events. One would assume that in a district the size of Poughkeepsie, with six elementary schools, there were more than 19 events held throughout the school year. In addition, school administration is unlikely to be aware of the news/feature value of their events, particularly at the elementary school level. Poughkeepsie High School accounted for nearly

half of the 49 documents (44%) and the district as a whole accounted for 26% (13 documents). Krieger, in particular, did not take advantage of the current system at all with zero (0) press releases/announcements. Clinton, Morse and the Circle of Courage each received one (1) press release/announcement for the school year, with Columbus and Smith receiving two (2) each, Warring three (3) and the Middle School four (4). Clearly, there are events at these schools that are not being promoted to media. Of particular note is the lack of promotion for student performances, recitals, etc. While school administration is presumably making parents aware of these events, they are possible sources of positive feature stories/photos in local media.

- Press releases concerning student/staff achievement accounted for 32% of the documents, second to events, while procedural announcements comprised 20%. These numbers seem healthy.

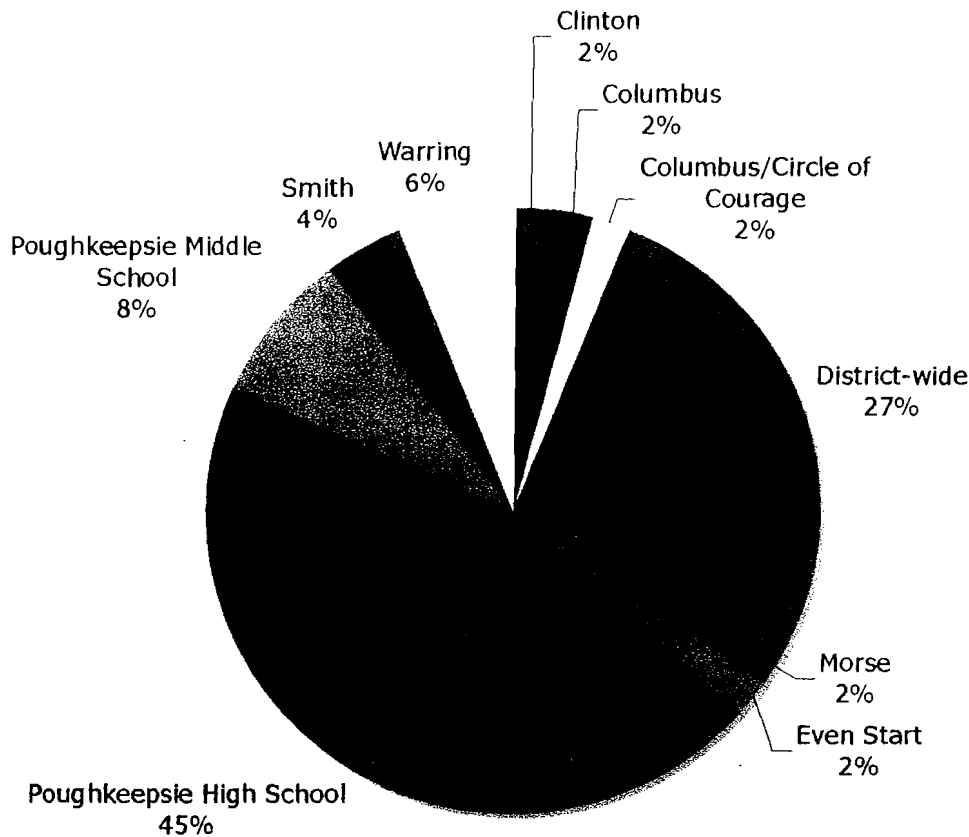
- The vast majority of the documents (75%) were press releases with the remainder being requests for coverage. With events (which the media can attend) accounting for 38% of these documents, requests for coverage should be slightly higher. Few documents were identified as photo opportunities.

- It appears that in only one instance (a food service announcement) was a press release also used as a community announcement (with distribution to local non-profits, etc.). This is an avenue of communicating with parents/guardians/case workers that is being overlooked, particularly in a district with such a high percentage of children eligible for reduced-price meals and other assistance.

- In general, it appears that documents were produced and submitted in a timely manner. However, it was difficult to analyze the true effectiveness in this area, as many documents did not contain cover sheets, which would help determine when releases were sent to daily vs. weekly newspapers. Documents may need to be submitted earlier to weekly outlets.

...Press Release Report

Press Releases/Announcements by School



* Note, Krieger not included in chart, no data

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) The public relations office should always be listed as a contact in the event primary contacts are unavailable. This would allow the public relations office to either answer reporters' questions or impart the importance of responding to the media to the appropriate parties.
- 2) As stated before, the system of relying on school administration to promote events is too passive. School administrators (through an appropriate support staff person) and with teacher input, should be required to submit to the public relations office a weekly calendar of events, at least one week prior. This would allow the public relations office to mine such events for additional coverage. Many newspapers, particularly weeklies, rely on feature photos to fill holes in their publications, and children are an editor's favorite. More press releases and requests for coverage need to be prominently labeled as photo opportunities. Additionally, calls to local editors on the morning of the event, reminding them of the opportunity for a photo, may help increase coverage.
- 3) More announcements concerning district/government services should be disseminated to appropriate community organizations that serve low-income families and children.
- 4) Deadlines with local publications should be confirmed and adhered to, preferably in the 24 hours prior to said deadlines.

2. Press Clippings Report

Data analyzed were 134 news clippings published by local print media between Aug. 28, 2003 and Aug. 10, 2004. Data was broken into the following categories:

- Publication.
- Type of article, i.e. news article, feature story, blurb, column, extended caption/standalone photo, mention, profile, letter to the editor and enterprise piece (a lengthy news analysis using multiple sources).
- Subject type: Event, Student/Staff Achievement, Procedural (food service, registration information, etc.), news/other (coverage of Board of Education meetings, district budget, mandated testing).
- Tone of coverage, specifically whether an article is positive, negative or neutral.
- School: Clinton, Columbus, Krieger, Morse, Smith, Warring, Circle of Courage, Poughkeepsie Middle, Poughkeepsie High, or District-wide.
- Source / Contact: Superintendent Watson, principals, teachers, third parties, Public Relations Office, and students.
- News clippings were also compared to press releases and requests for coverage submitted to local media during the same time frame.

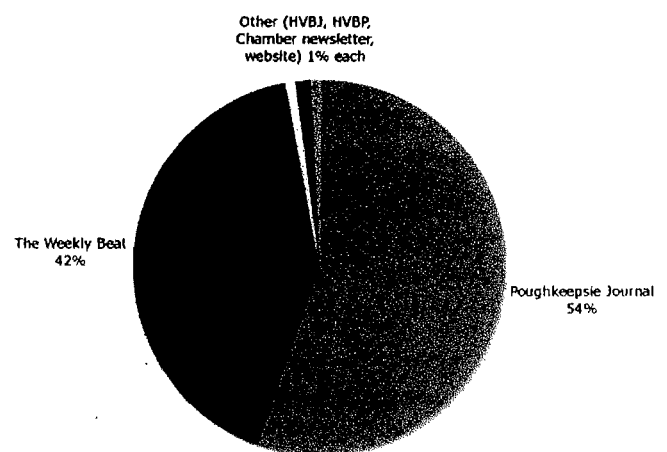
Findings:

- The majority of coverage (96%) was published in the Poughkeepsie Journal and Weekly Beat. Hudson Valley Business Journal, Hudson Valley Black Press, midhudsonnews.com, and the Poughkeepsie Area Chamber of Commerce newsletter each published one article during the 2003-04 school year.
- The majority of print media coverage (38%) was of the news variety (school board meetings, budget, etc). Feature stories accounted for 16% of coverage, and blurbs (mostly procedural) accounted for 17%. All other categories were less than 10% each. These numbers seem healthy.
- The overall tone of coverage was positive. The determination of whether an article is positive, negative, or neutral, is, of course, subjective. Neutral articles may cover a controversial subject, however, they are fair and present all sides of the issue at hand

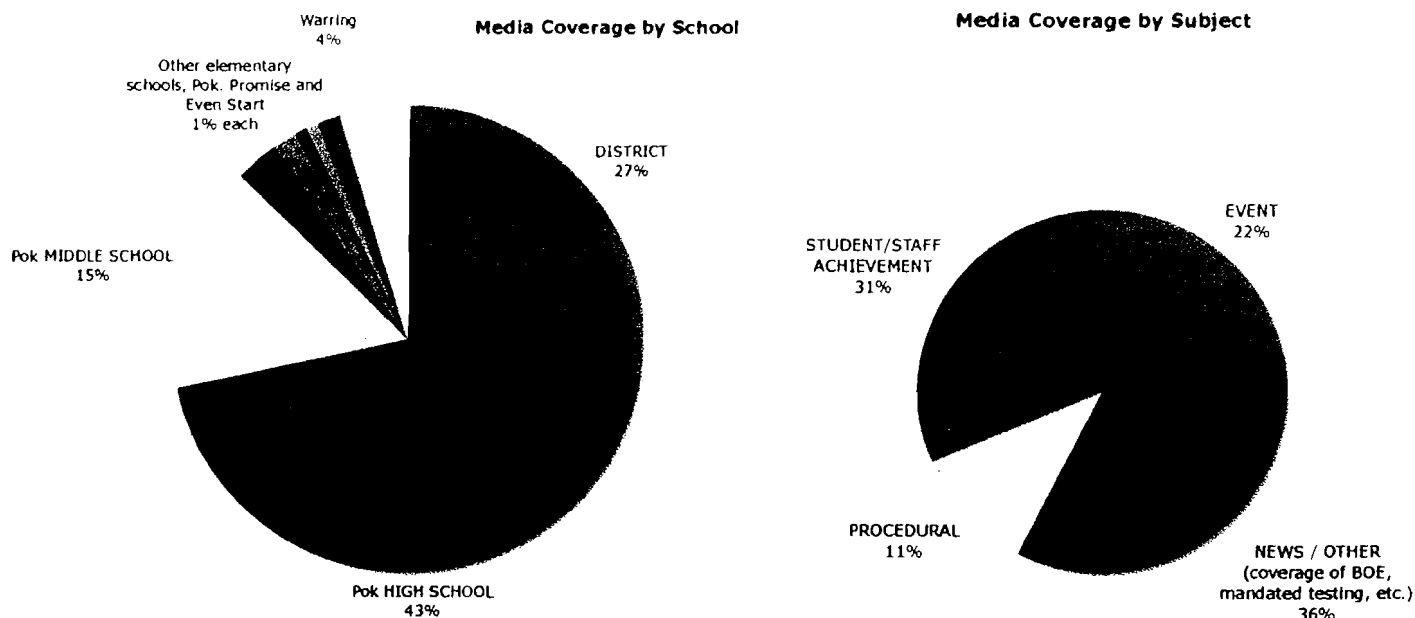
(via parents, district administration, etc.). The subject of the article may be “bad news,” such as rising taxes or staff cuts, but were deemed neutral if the issue was covered fairly. While one party may make negative remarks about the district, those remarks are balanced by quotes from district supporters. Positive articles were those that left this reader feeling good (a student winning a scholarship, improvements in test scores, etc.). Most of the coverage deemed negative was in the form of letters to the editor. Only two news articles were deemed negative—one covering a dire budget situation and attending staff cuts, and one involving the false report of a gun at the Middle School (the majority of those quoted in this piece were frightened parents in the midst of not knowing what was happening with their children—subsequent follow-up stories were deemed neutral).

- Poughkeepsie High School received the most coverage (43%), with the district as a whole receiving 27%. Poughkeepsie Middle School received 15%. The elementary schools and other programs (Even Start, Poughkeepsie’s Promise) make up the remainder.
- Sources appeared appropriate, with Superintendent Watson quoted in 11% of articles. Parents, the Board of Education, students, teachers, and third parties are used effectively by local media.
- The media responded to a majority of the press releases submitted by the district.

Media Coverage by Publication



...Press Clippings Report



The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) While it is to be expected that the majority of coverage would appear in the local daily and weekly newspapers, the district does not seem to be taking advantage of other sources of print publicity, particularly the Poughkeepsie Area Chamber of Commerce's newsletter, The Bottom Line. It is recommended that the district institute a stronger relationship with the Chamber, perhaps running a monthly column in the newsletter during the school year (September to June).
- 2) Consistent coverage of school board meetings, budgets, etc. is a standard for any successful local newspaper. The district could, however, benefit from more feature stories (which tend to be positive). Outreach to local education reporters is recommended.
- 3) The elementary schools are not receiving the coverage they should. See previous "Media Communications."

Note:

Most letters to the editor were negative in tone. This is to be expected, as people are more likely to write letters when they are angry or upset. To the district's credit, a negative letter regarding the safety of children walking to school in the snow was immediately followed up with the addition of a bus route. This response received positive news and editorial coverage, indicating a willingness on the part of the district to respond to community concerns. Nicely done.

The district can and should encourage parents to write positive letters to local newspapers. Guest columns or commentaries by the superintendent and school board members concerning controversial subjects should be used to directly address community concerns.

III. Communicating with Hispanic Families

Any review of communications practices at the Poughkeepsie City School District would be lacking if it didn't include an analysis of the burgeoning Hispanic community's impact upon local education. Arguably the fastest-growing demographic group in the district, the number of Hispanic students grew by more than 30 percent from the 2001-02 school year to the 2003-04 school year, according to the NYS District Report Card. The Hispanic student population is now approaching 20 percent of the district's enrollment and current trends indicate that the number will only increase in the coming decade. This presents special challenges not only in terms of dealing effectively with a growing number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students, but also in communicating appropriately with their predominantly Spanish-speaking parents and guardians. If it is the aim of the PCSD to involve all parents in their children's education—as stated in the Steering Committee's Parental Involvement Report—then it stands to reason that those parents who speak only Spanish should be addressed in their native tongue.

No District Policy

The district currently has no overarching policy governing or guiding communications with Hispanic families. Instead, we found that each building and department attempts to scale the language barrier individually, with differing strategies and mixed results. While Assistant Superintendent Dr. Fern Aefsky said it is the policy of the pupil personnel services department to translate all publicly-disseminated documents into Spanish, few school principals report translating handouts, newsletters or other written information directed to parents.

Most schools appear to rely upon an informal network of bi-lingual staffers, parents or even students to help communicate with foreign-born parents. For instance, one elementary principal said he has a "pretty solid number" of bi-lingual Hispanic mothers who work with the building's PTA to convey information to the non-English speaking moms. Another principal listed "money, staffing and technology" as the chief barriers to communicating

with Spanish-speaking parents, describing his building's approach: "We send messages in Spanish on occasion, but not always. If a Spanish-speaking staff member is available to assist with the translation, we send home letters in Spanish. For messages that are extremely important, we translate into Spanish. The district could assist me if software could be purchased that translates English into Spanish. That would be very useful for my secretary when she types my letters to parents."

Similarly, the district's website is burdened by inconsistency in its efforts to provide translations of important district information. A "translation bar" was installed recently that allows users to click a national flag icon, which triggers a translation of the page into the language represented by the flag. (We assume that Spanish is represented by the Mexican flag, but of course not all Hispanics within the community hail from Mexico. And, the device gives equal weight to Portuguese, Korean and even Norwegian, among other languages not significantly represented within the district.) Some important documents and information available on the site—such as the Title I Parents Newsletter, the FERPA Notice and Poughkeepsie Pride—are rendered in PDF format and, therefore, cannot be "read" by the translation software. Also, the translation software used for this purpose is from an off-site free service that should be checked independently for reliability. However, as an attempt to provide some Spanish translation service on the site, the effort is laudable.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Karen Markeloff acknowledged that the district does not have a cogent strategy in place for addressing the growing Spanish-speaking population. "I think the strategy is to hire more staff who are bi-lingual," she said, estimating that "1-2 percent" of the current teaching staff can claim to be bi-lingual. In the meantime, Markeloff said, Spanish-speaking families "tend to cluster" where there is a strong bi-lingual staff within the district, such as Morse Elementary School. She echoed what we had heard from several educators: that Hispanic families "tend to get involved" in their children's education if able.

...Communicating With Hispanic Families

Community Concerns

The leaders of AHORA, a local non-profit that represents the Hispanic community, say that communication problems account for a majority of the issues discussed at the monthly Latino Roundtable hosted by the group. “The biggest complaint and issue is communications,” said AHORA interim president Jose Morales of agencies (including the school districts) charged with Hispanic issues. “It’s the quantity. They cannot handle the volume. They don’t have the staffing, or they don’t have the correct staffing (i.e. bi-lingual).”

In that vein, Morales and AHORA Treasurer Robert Mallory praised the work of PMS Principal Carl Pabon for addressing communications-centered problems head on. Earlier this year, they said, AHORA representatives had met several times with Pabon and jointly held community forums that served to identify and address communications issues between the district and the Hispanic community. Now, he said, when a caller reaches the school via telephone, the answering machine gives the option to receive tele-prompts in Spanish. And, school materials are translated and the building’s automated calling system—used to inform parents of absences and other important day-to-day matters—utilizes Spanish to call known Hispanic households. “He’s putting things in place to address the problem,” Morales said, noting, however, that the rest of district’s schools need to take similar action in order for communication with the Hispanic community to be effective at all educational levels.

AHORA recommended that the district address Spanish-speaking parents by: conducting more community outreach, translating all materials into Spanish, hiring a full-time dedicated translator, developing a Spanish-language newsletter or translating existing newsletters, and encouraging the hiring of bi-lingual staffers in all buildings. Interestingly, Morales stressed he is not a proponent of bi-lingual education, believing that immigrant children should learn English if they are to hope to thrive in this country. However, he said, a Spanish-speaking student’s ability to learn English is greatly enhanced if his/her parents are involved and that requires communication with the

families. “I’m not a proponent of bi-lingual education, but (the district) has got to have a way to communicate to the families.”

The Newburgh Experience

Carmen Vazqueztell has been director of bi-lingual education for the Newburgh Expanded School District for the last 10 years. The program has been in existence more than 20 years. Since she’s been director, the Hispanic student population at Newburgh has nearly doubled. Newburgh follows a “transitional bi-lingual educational model” where the ultimate goal is conversion to English; however, Hispanic ESL and LEP students receive academic instruction in Spanish. “The primary goal of the program is to make the child proficient in English but to not fall behind while they’re learning.”

Vazqueztell estimated that Poughkeepsie’s Hispanic population is roughly at a point where Newburgh found itself when she became the director of bi-lingual ed 10 years ago, when the district’s Hispanic student population was roughly 20 percent of the overall student population. “It will continue to grow very rapidly. (Poughkeepsie School District) will need to set up an infrastructure that will allow it to serve the population appropriately,” she said.

Newburgh has a policy requiring translation of all district materials into Spanish. That policy, adopted by the board of education is enforced and maintained by the superintendent. “We’ve translated absolutely everything. Every single document that goes out to parents...It takes a lot of work.” She said there are professional consultants and services (including a professional translation firm that resides in Poughkeepsie) available to do the work on the front end, but pointed out an ongoing need for in-house translation services as letters home to parents are generated often.

Also, she said, Newburgh strives to hire front office personnel (administrative assistants and clerical professionals) who are bi-lingual. “It’s a policy that every effort should be made to recruit bi-lingual office staff... We need to have someone in the front office to speak Spanish and communicate with the parents.”

...Communicating With Hispanic Families

She noted that there's a direct correlation between parental involvement in Hispanic students' studies and academic achievement—likely true of all students but particularly so with Hispanic families: “If you ask parents who risked coming across the border why they did it...it was to give their children a better chance at education.” According to Vazquezteell, Newburgh's Hispanic students have a “much higher graduation rate,” perform well on standardized tests and successfully pass out of the ESL program in three years in higher percentages than other districts. She said 72 percent of the district's LEP students achieve passing grades on the 11th grade English Regents exam after three years in the program. And, she said, the district has fewer referrals of ESL and LEP students to special education programs (as sometimes happens erroneously because of language issues.)

The district has become sought after in recent years, she said, for instruction in developing programs for Hispanic students and families. This year, Vazquezteell's department has been toured by representatives from Kingston (Mary Corsones, assistant superintendent for ESL) and Beacon (Wanda Gonzalez, ESL director), who were seeking

to learn more about the bi-lingual education program. And last year, Middletown educators sought help from Newburgh in forming a ESL parent advisory council.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With nearly one in five of the Poughkeepsie City School District's students currently hailing from Hispanic households, it seems clear that the district should assess its strategy for communicating with those households. Without the benefit of a guiding policy, administrators have been left to fend for themselves, resulting in patchwork solutions at best. A systemic approach is called for—one that will be both inclusive for all Hispanic families and affordable for the district. It should be noted that a more effective program that addresses Hispanic student and family needs could reap benefits in key areas beneficial to the district as a whole. Namely, better communication with Hispanic parents could spur an increase in parental involvement and result in improved academic performance among that student population; and some would argue that it might help reduce the number of referrals from the LEP population to special education.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Gather an inventory of all district publications, calendars, handouts and postings, and determine the cost of translating those documents into Spanish for ongoing dissemination.
- 2) Conduct a needs assessment to determine if an in-house translator position is warranted and fiscally feasible. Otherwise, it should explore options for translations on an ongoing basis, so that principals and other administrators can translate information quickly and reliably.
- 3) Consider a policy designed to encourage—through incentives or otherwise—the hiring of bi-lingual office staff. Ultimately, the desired outcome would be to have at least one bi-lingual office staff member in each district building.
- 4) Explore new methods of outreach to the Hispanic community designed to encourage its involvement and engagement with the district. Seek community partners, new members for the PTAs and committee representatives amongst the Hispanic community.
- 5) District officials should visit the Newburgh Enlarged School District bi-lingual education program and study its applicability to the Poughkeepsie City School District.
- 6) Explore grants and other funding streams to support expansion of its Hispanic program.

IV. Parental Involvement

A. PTAs

With numerous studies linking educational achievement to parental involvement, the Poughkeepsie City School District has rightly made increasing parental involvement one of its key goals. One of the greatest indicators of parental involvement in a school district can be found in its PTAs, the traditional organization that hosts interaction and communication between parents and teachers. One could probably gauge the vitality of a district's parental involvement by first determining if its PTAs are active, vibrant participants within the educational community. Or, are the organizations drained of energy, lacking members and constantly struggling to survive? A case could be made that the latter is true within the schools of the Poughkeepsie City School District.

Currently, only four of the district's nine schools possess active PTA chapters: Clinton Elementary, Krieger Elementary, Warring Elementary and the Poughkeepsie Middle School. And the leadership of those chapters report difficulty in attracting and maintaining active members.

While some of the blame for the sagging state of PTAs in Poughkeepsie may be placed at the feet of demographics—generational poverty, single-parent households, Spanish-speaking parents, commuters and multiple job holders—a portion must also be allocated to diminished support for PTAs and their members. District public relations materials—such as Poughkeepsie Pride or the district website—contain little information concerning PTAs or their contribution to local education. And recent district reports centering upon parental issues barely acknowledge the organization.

For instance, the district Steering Committee Parent Involvement Plan makes little reference to PTAs—except in a few lines concerning implementation—apparently overlooking their eroded status in district affairs. If one wishes to energize parental involvement (as called for in the Steering Committee's report) it seems counterintuitive to overlook an organization that offers an established framework for grassroots parental involvement. If

correctly constituted, PTAs represent the traditional backbone of parental involvement in school districts, serving as community cheerleaders for educational initiatives, a pool of volunteers in support of school activities and fundraising partners. They come with a regional and national support network that helps guide the local chapters in myriad ways.

While generally praising their relationships with building principals, local PTA leaders interviewed expressed the belief that the district doesn't adequately utilize the PTA as a resource in its mission to educate Poughkeepsie's school children. One former PTA official encouraged the district to resurrect the PTA Council—an umbrella group uniting all PTA chapters within the district—as a way to provide support for individual chapters and to act as a liaison between the PTAs and the Board of Education. (Other urban school districts in the area, such as Kingston, maintain PTA councils.) Another PTA official called upon the Board of Education to schedule dedicated meetings with PTA representatives “at least two or three times during the school year” in order to overcome what she terms a “communication barrier” between parents and district officials.

PTA leaders confirm that their ranks have been declining due to “burn out” among overworked volunteers and difficulties recruiting new members. The organization is strained, they say, in schools where leadership has undergone turnover.

It could be argued that the lack of an effective PTA chapter in the Poughkeepsie Middle School—PTA representatives there report waning interest among members in accepting leadership positions—led to the formation of the so-called Parents Committee within the last two years. The splinter group of activist parents has held meetings with district administrators, board of education members and building officials aimed at addressing a range of concerns. This would be viewed as a constructive, two-way interaction between the district and parents if it weren't the proper province of the local PTA chapter. This is evidence that the traditional vehicle for parental conversation with the district has broken

...PTAs

down and that motivated parents do not view the PTA as an effective resource, even where a chapter exists.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The district should take steps to re-energize and support its flagging PTAs as well as encourage the formation of new chapters within the district through outreach and improved communication. As stated before, PTAs are the traditional building blocks for parental involvement, something the district is struggling to improve. It stands to reason

that these groups should be supported, even celebrated, whenever possible. And individuals or informal networks of parents should be aggressively sought to start new chapters in buildings that have none. Ongoing, two-way communication should be established between the district and its PTAs, giving the organization stature as the “official voice” for parents within the district. And best practices among local PTAs should be acknowledged and shared with other groups so that they might be mimicked to ensure favorable outcomes.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) The Board of Education should schedule regular meetings with PTA representatives. If this is too onerous, appoint a board liaison to the PTA in order to listen to parent concerns and bring them back to the full board.
- 2) Engage in a concerted marketing drive designed to identify and round up volunteers to serve on the PTAs in various buildings. Utilize all district and school publications (as well as the district website) in this effort.
- 3) Utilize district publications, newsletters, website and press releases to acknowledge and celebrate the involvement of parents in the educational community.
- 4) Invite PTA leaders to make presentations during the public portions of Board of Education meetings.
- 5) Consider appointing a temporary district/PTA administrative liaison to help organize and facilitate the above-mentioned steps.

B. Steering Committee Report

The District Steering Committee's Parent Involvement Plan, approved by the Board of Education in June, 2005, charges the district with developing and implementing a plan "to have all parents actively participate in school activities." It represents an ambitious goal, especially for a district that has seen declining parental participation in its PTAs, BLTs and other school-related activities. However, the goal correctly acknowledges the connection between parental involvement and academic achievement that is so often cited in state and federal educational research.

The plan outlines five "sub-goals": 1) improved elementary orientation programs for all schools 2) regular, two-way and meaningful communication between school and home 3) support for implementation of the revisions to school orientation programs 4) more consistency in secondary orientation programs as well as a more complete and better-organized website 5) identifying promising practices and programs involving parents as well as exploring barriers to parental participation. The report goes on to set a rigorous implementation timetable for administrators and BLTs to follow over the coming school year.

As noted before, the Steering Committee is to be lauded for "setting the bar high" for the Poughkeepsie City School District. The report correctly recognizes that orientations are an opportunity to bring parents into the schools for positive face-to-face interactions that can serve as catalysts for future involvement. It notes the importance of communication between school and home by suggesting improvements. It calls for some fresh ideas, such as the proposed "Buddy System" tying veteran parents to new parents for mutual support and the so-called "Parent University" workshops to help meld parents into the educational process in a positive way. (In fact, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Fern Aefsky reported recently that the Dyson Foundation had awarded a grant of \$10,000 to the district for the implementation of two Parent University workshops.) And, the report stresses the need to embrace the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program, which appears to resonate with district families.

However, from a communications standpoint, the Parent Involvement Plan appears flawed in ways that could, if not addressed, dilute the plan's ultimate effectiveness. Some areas of concern:

- As noted in the section of this audit addressing the district's growing Hispanic community, the district needs to address its many Spanish-speaking parents in order to be truly inclusive in its stated goal of involving all parents. The Steering Committee report, however, makes no mention of Hispanic families, other than a single reference calling for translations on the district website.

- In its second sub-goal, the Steering Committee report calls for "regular, two-way and meaningful" communication with parents, but offers no new vehicle for "listening" to parents' concerns. Ultimately, it is the listening part of the equation—or the feedback loop—that makes communication a dialogue. The report also appears to rely too greatly upon the Internet in order to accomplish its goal, giving but one web-based initiative to address perceived shortcomings in this regard. Again, with hit counts indicating roughly 800 unique users each month, no more than one in four district parents can be assumed to be accessing the district website for their information on a regular basis. That leaves nearly 75 percent of parents relying upon other sources for information concerning their children's education. Clearly, in order to be effective, the strategy must incorporate the use of all media and vehicles of communication.

- The report does not delve into who, specifically, will be responsible for the creation of its new "parent friendly" materials. It broadly identifies the individual school administrators and BLTs as the future source of the written introductory packets and parent/student friendly handbooks called for in the report. However, Assistant Superintendent Karen Markeloff and others have suggested that educators find communicating with parents difficult. "We just don't understand one another," she said, referring to the findings of the Parent Survey that provided much of the basis for the Steering Committee Report. "It suggests we may need to change the way we communicate (with parents)... It has to do with communications styles, the way that the school's personnel talks to parents."

...Steering Committee Report

• Similarly, the fourth sub-goal of the Parent Involvement Plan describes district handbooks for students as “difficult for families to understand” and that school information is “fragmented, hard to locate, incomplete, sometimes undocumented.” It does not, however, task a specific office or person with addressing these deficiencies other than to ask the individual building councils and BLTs to “review buildings’ current expectations, revise as necessary for handbook.” Again, without a coordinated, global approach to the problem, these materials may be reviewed and revised but remain fragmented, hard to locate, incomplete and difficult to understand. As Markeloff pointed out: “(Parents) can’t understand the student handbook or code of conduct because it’s written in lawyer-ese.”

• Also, how materials are distributed and maintained becomes an issue. As part of her research for the Steering Committee report, one committee member said she approached the front offices of both the Middle School and the High School seeking information, as if she were a parent new to the district. In each case, she said, the front office personnel could not provide her with basic, up-to-date handouts and referred her to the guidance office in order to obtain the requested materials. She needed to enter the schools, find the guidance office and wait there to be assisted.

• Accountability for distribution and maintenance of district printed matter is critical to ensuring that parents receive the information they need, when they need it. Board member Carol Bogle, who is also a parent of a PMS student, questioned the schools’ reliance upon students to deliver important information to parents, as is often the case. “It’s an inefficient way to communicate. You don’t get accurate, complete information from a child. Even sending things home with a child is unreliable,” Bogle said, adding that the district may need to allocate more resources to insure reliable distribution of information to parents. “The U.S. Mail comes to mind (as a reliable distribution source). We as a district have to decide whether parent communication is important enough to budget the dollars necessary.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The criticisms outlined above are not meant to blunt the thrust of the Steering Committee’s Parent Involvement Plan; rather, they are intended to help sharpen it. Reaching a goal as lofty as the one sought in the report—namely, to involve all parents in school activities—will demand a concerted effort at every level and from every constituency. It will require focus and follow-through by central and building level administrators alike. And, above all, it will require communication.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Since PTAs and BLTs comprise an important part of the infrastructure necessary to build and maintain parental involvement, the district should institute a marketing campaign designed to solicit new parent volunteers to participate in these organizations.
- 2) The Hispanic community and the language issues associated with it should be addressed in order to truly include all parents. See related recommendations in “Communicating with Hispanic Families” section.
- 3) Charge an appropriate individual or office (possibly the public relations office) with the task of writing all “parent friendly” materials under the supervision of the appropriate educators.
- 4) Distribution strategies for important communications with parents should be analyzed and upgraded to offer more accountability in delivery. Handbooks and parent documents should be maintained at all schools’ front offices to ensure availability.

V. Teachers

The Poughkeepsie City School District includes nearly 350 teachers, who stand on the front lines in the struggle to instruct children in this challenged urban district. Teachers are represented by the Poughkeepsie Public School Teachers Association (PPSTA), which also represents a range of other professionals such as psychologists, social workers and librarians. The union is currently in the last year of an unprecedented five-year contract with the district; it expires in June, 2006.

The auditor interviewed PPSTA President Barry Kaufmann in August, 2005, and met with a focus group of five teachers (with representatives from the elementary, middle and high schools) in November, 2005. It should be noted that the five teachers participating in the interview had been recruited by Kaufmann and that each teacher held some position in the union. When asked if they thought their union positions might “bias” their perceptions of district communications, they all stressed that their views were, for the most part, representative of their fellow teachers.

Teacher/Parent Communications

Teachers communicate with parents in various ways, including face-to-face meetings during parent/teacher conferences, telephone calls home to discuss student academic and disciplinary issues, progress reports and report cards mailed to students’ homes, notes sent home (often via the student), orientations and other group gatherings at the schools. The elementary and PMS teachers indicated that they tended to communicate more frequently with parents than their colleagues teaching at higher grade levels.

All expressed some level of frustration at not being able to contact some parents via their home telephone numbers, explaining that numbers are sometimes incorrect or disconnected when they attempt to speak directly to a parent. At the beginning of the school year, they said, students are asked to fill out personal information forms or have their parents fill out the forms, sign and return them to class. Some teachers said numbers don’t always “match up” when it comes time to contact a parent or guardian.

They advised collaboration with central registration in order to assure more accurate information.

Additionally, one teacher suggested that parents should be asked for their e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers as well as their home numbers, which are not always the best way to reach working parents during the school day.

The Rauhauser survey of parents, staff and students conducted during the 2004-05 school year appears to back up the perception that communications between teachers and parents is lacking. According to a reading of the report, professional staff districtwide related concerns about deficiencies in three key areas of Home-School Relations: cooperation between teachers and parents with regard to homework monitoring, parents providing support to the school on discipline, and parents understanding and supporting the school’s instructional program. According to the study, perceived strengths in Home-School Relations included: effective Parent-Teacher conferences, parents have opportunities to visit the school to observe educational programs, and expectations are communicated to all parents.

Communication Between Teachers and Administration

The teachers interviewed complained about a lack of effective communication between themselves and administrators, relating anecdotes of miscommunications involving the ordering of classroom materials. The teachers gave instances where their input had not been sought prior to the purchase of the teaching materials, which, they said, were later found to be obsolete or redundant. The teachers expressed the belief that their feedback to administrators on a range of issues—including training, curricula and security—often isn’t heeded, to the district’s detriment.

Most of the teachers interviewed described their Building Level Teams (BLTs) as barely visible, rarely communicating their activities to the teaching staff. Another teacher said the responsibility for disseminating information following BLT meetings hasn’t been established, citing BLT proposals

...Teachers

that never get acted upon. “It’s never clear whose responsibility it is to filter information and bring it back to the staff,” she said.

For the most part, teachers appeared unaware of the district Steering Committee Parent Involvement Plan, enacted in June, 2005. “If it was handed out, it wasn’t stressed,” said one.

The Rauhauser Survey of Professional Staff Perceptions—taken from a survey of both teachers and administrators—differs somewhat from the impressions offered by the teachers interviewed in that, within the study, principals are generally viewed favorably as communicators. Under the Instructional Leadership section of the survey, the following were observed as strengths district-wide: the principal has a clear understanding of the school’s mission, the principal effectively runs meetings which have a clear agenda where discussion is limited to relevant topics, and the principal is highly visible throughout the school. Greater favorability was registered in the survey among elementary staff, which listed several more strengths in Instructional Leadership, including: the principal communicates openly and frankly with both staff and students, and the principal evaluates teachers based on criteria which focuses on instructional improvements. Communications-related concerns were registered among survey participants in both the Middle School and High School. The concerns centered on lines of communication between staff and administrators, including: that there be open channels of communication between students, staff and administration, and that the planning process has built in feedback mechanisms for mid-course correction and annual evaluation.

Restructuring

The criticisms offered by the focus group appeared to dovetail with the union’s lingering discontent with the decision earlier this year to restructure sixth-grade classes and abolish the pre-kindergarten program. The teachers said the decisions “came out of the blue” and without taking into account feedback from teachers and committees convened to work on the problems (such as the PMS restructuring team.)

The restructuring committee—comprised of

teachers, parents and administrators—had worked for several months on how best to address the Middle School’s “failure to meet adequate yearly progress” designation by the State Education Department. “They worked very, very diligently and hard...The problem was that the restructuring committee never saw their report before it went to the Board of Education,” the PPTSA president said. Because Superintendent Watson recommended a course of action and the board voted upon it without adequate consultation with the restructuring committee, he said, the committee members and others involved “felt very used and angry because of the way that it went down...It caused a lot of anxiety, a lot of anger. Not so much for the decision—although that would have created some—but more for the way that it went down.”

While he believes that Watson acted out of a genuine and entitled sense of urgency (concerns that the State Education Department might take over management of the school) in a critical situation, the PPSTA president feels the matter could have been handled with more sensitivity. And, if all parties had been included, it might have been carried out more effectively, he said. “The ability to have a dialogue wasn’t there...On a decision of this magnitude you can expedite things, but you at least need a face-to-face dialogue.”

As a systemic solution, he recommended that, in the future, the Board of Education require a “sign off” from all key stakeholding groups—committees, administrators, building teams and the union—before it acts upon major initiatives.

The union leader described the teaching staff as dedicated and involved and willing to work with the administration on tackling the problems facing the district. “But the need for input is critical.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Appropriate, two-way communication needs to be re-established with teachers in the Poughkeepsie City School District, if only to give teachers a boost of morale and a sense of involvement at a critical time. The decisions by Superintendent Watson and the Board of Education regarding restructuring and the abolishment of pre-kindergarten were

...Teachers

policy decisions made in an urgent atmosphere—a threatened state takeover and dire fiscal realities—that called for action. As such the decisions themselves are not within the province of this audit to question. However, the communications process involved can and should be analyzed, if only to avoid such palpable discontent among involved parties in the future. If the district asks constituents—teachers, parents, administrators, taxpayers, students—to serve on committees charged with studying problems and recommending solutions, it should in some way acknowledge their efforts—read their reports, discuss

the results, explain decisions, etc. This will go a long way toward avoiding apathy and even enmity.

The roles and responsibilities of BLTs should be clarified and their agendas shared with teachers, possibly through a monthly bulletin. The responsibility for sharing information discussed in BLT sessions should be established so that it is shared with the professional staff in a timely manner.

Better registration information on parents' should be acquired and shared with teachers. This situation may be improved with the district moving to a central registration model.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) District administrators should review and respond to professional staff concerns regarding restructuring and seek “front line” progress reports on the current situation.
- 2) Institute policy guidelines governing BLT communications. For instance, determine who is responsible for sharing information with staff and central administration.
- 3) Bring teachers—via department heads or BLTs—up to date on the Parent Involvement Plan and their role in it. Stress the plan's importance as a district initiative.

VI. Administration

[Note: The recent revelation that Superintendent Robert Watson will be leaving the Poughkeepsie City School District after six years at the helm changes the thrust of this report somewhat. It is our hope that the interim superintendent will find this examination useful in the challenging first days of his/her administration. In our opinion, it now becomes important that the report focus less upon Watson's communications techniques and more upon those of his subordinates in central administration and the system in which they currently operate. Nonetheless, the two are intertwined and, therefore, must be discussed together.]

The administrative team has been grappling with significant challenges over the last few years, including a "School in Corrective Action" designation at the Poughkeepsie Middle School, sub-par academic performance at PMS and PHS, low parental involvement, a rapidly-growing Hispanic population, and strained finances resulting in the need—for the first time in recent memory—for staff layoffs. These challenges tend to overshadow the many achievements accomplished during the same period under the stewardship of Superintendent Watson and the Board of Education; namely, the completion of a \$27 million district-wide school improvement and expansion project, the creation of the innovative Circle of Courage Learning Center and the installation of the Discovery Channel television and video arts studio.

Administrators have been busy on all fronts addressing the myriad complications that come with both the negative and the positive issues facing the district. In a laudable self-improvement effort, the district has embarked upon several studies within the last year designed to assess and correct perceived gaps. They include the Parent Survey and Steering Committee Parent Involvement Report; the Rauhauser Survey of parents, teachers and administrators; a review and rewrite of the entire District Policy Manual; and, of course, this communications audit. Additionally, the district has abolished its pre-Kindergarten program, expanded its Kindergarten program from half-day to full-day, and restructured its sixth-grade program. Needless to say, this has been a tumultuous year for the Poughkeepsie City School District.

This type of hectic, even frenetic, atmosphere can expose serious flaws in communications strategies. Discussions with central office administrators appear to bear this out as a legitimate concern.

Superintendent Watson would typically meet weekly with his "cabinet" of central administrators, including his assistant, Dwight Paine; interim Assistant Superintendent for Personnel Donald Rothman; Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum Karen Markeloff; Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services Dr. Fern Aefsky; Compensatory Programs Director Dr. Helen Blankenship; Business Manager Jeff Baker; Building and Grounds Director Gary McGrath; Public Relations Manager Nancy Miller; Director of Testing George Castiglione; Even Start Program Coordinator Wesley Lee; Director of Technology Evan Panagiatopolis; and After School Program Coordinator Linda Flanagan. (An organizational chart was requested but was not available. The District Policy Manual calls for maintaining such a chart.)

Generally, Superintendent Watson would meet with all principals once each month at a session attended by members of the central administrative staff, assistants and other educators. The Superintendent held weekly face-to-face briefings with Murphy (PHS) and Pabon (PMS), while Assistant Superintendent Markeloff was responsible for regular sessions with the elementary school principals.

For purposes of this report, the auditor conducted interviews with eight of the district's nine principals, including: Nadine Jackson-Ivey, Clinton Elementary; Anthony Lupoli, Morse Elementary; Thomas Hartford, Columbus Elementary; Lisa Thompson (with interim principal James Foster), Warring Elementary; Sam Letterii, Smith Elementary; Brenda Alston (with staff member John Rodriguez), Circle of Courage; Carl Pabon, Poughkeepsie Middle School; Robert Murphy, Poughkeepsie High School.

For the most part, the interviewer found principals refreshingly candid about the challenges of communicating both internally and externally, offering a glimpse of how differing philosophies affect communications within different buildings.

...Administration

Some found the public relations aspect of their jobs a distraction, tending to minimize its importance among the array of tasks facing a principal. One revealed a reluctance to seek public relations for activities because he's "not someone who looks to get his name in the paper."

Other principals, however, see community relations as a critical component of their jobs. Some work diligently with other district officials to promote their buildings' achievements in the local press, with apparent success. This appears to explain the disparity of press coverage between various schools as delineated in the "Media Relations" section of this report.

Accountability

Concerns about accountability appeared to be a central theme running through many of the interviews conducted with central administrators as well as building principals. From a communications standpoint, accountability involves acknowledging received information and then responding to it in some way.

One well-traveled administrator, who worked in several other districts before coming to Poughkeepsie, cited unreliable communications as one of the district's most critical shortcomings. She noted that the district has been undergoing many new initiatives that complicate and strain communications. "Within the last year, there have been so many new initiatives... we need to maximize our time and resources. We have to build our own capacity to communicate better internally."

This central office administrator has experienced frustration trying to communicate to other administrators, particularly those at the building level. Many important memos and messages to building administrators went unread, she said, so her department tried a number of techniques—such as printing them on blue paper and hand delivering them—in order to call more attention to their importance. "They still don't tend to read my memos!" This administrator found it particularly disturbing because of the highly-regulated and confidential nature of her department's work. "Everybody has to be held accountable for opening

their mail," she said, adding that most principals do not utilize their e-mail programs for interoffice communications, a mode of communication she finds reliable and trackable. Instead of playing "phone tag" on important issues, she suggested that e-mail usage would heighten timeliness and overall accountability among administrators. "It would absolutely be helpful if all of our administrators used e-mail on a regular basis."

Similarly, some principals described communications with central office staff as inefficient and inconsistent. Principals explained that directives and other communications from central office administrators are often verbal and that, over time, the thrust of the messages can "change," leading to confusion. "One says one thing and the other says another thing...Lots of times things get changed around and confused," a principal stated. Most principals advocated for more directives being placed in writing in order to avoid ambiguity. "I do very well with direction. I get frustrated and don't do very well with ambiguity...A big fly in the ointment is that things are not given to you clearly," one said.

Uniformity of Communications

One central office administrator said the district needs more uniformity in its internal communications. "I would like to see some strong, agreed upon communications requirements...Give us a systemic approach where we're measuring the same things in our buildings," she said. Principals, in particular, need a system that is not too burdensome upon their many daily responsibilities, such as attendance, overtime, expenditures, climate and cleanliness, she said. "Those are monsters... (The new system) has got to be a fast read in the morning or a fast read in the afternoon," she noted, adding that any new communications system will be ineffective if it is not instituted as policy. "It's out of sight, out of mind. If it's not a requirement, don't chastise me for not having required it."

She, too, felt some principals might need additional training. "I see different levels of skill among the principals," she said, suggesting that a "skills assessment" of the administrators might prove instructive.

...Administration

However, one building principal called for more clarity and interaction between central office administrators and principals. "More direct communication with building principals is needed. Central administrators need to speak to us face-to-face and find out what the real student needs are in their buildings," he said.

An administrator acknowledged that central administrators need to do a better job of coordinating the flow of information to the principals. She believes central office administrators—pupil personnel, curriculum, compensatory programs, data and testing, in particular—should meet regularly to coordinate their message and the delivery of messages to the buildings. Often, she said, the central office sends "mixed messages" to the building administrators because they haven't coordinated their communications, resulting in confusion and lack of productivity. She also suggested meeting directly with the building administrators—an additional "give and take" type meeting—in order to flesh out issues and listen to concerns. "These principals need to have us in the same room listening to their concerns at the same time so we can respond in the same voice."

Conclusions and Recommendations

From interviews and observation, it is clear that Poughkeepsie City School District administrators employ a range of communications strategies—telephone, face-to-face, fax, inter-office mail, e-mail—in carrying out the day-to-day business of the district. To a degree this is natural in any organizational structure as all vehicles have their place and advantages. However, effective two-way communications require that all participants recognize and utilize the same communicative vehicle for important matters. The need for reliability in the delivery of information is

paramount in any organization, perhaps even more so in a school district facing organizational upheavals and heightened scrutiny.

Any systemic approach employed to enhance reliability must include a way for the message sender to know, with certainty, that the message has been received and acknowledged by the recipient. In some corporate systems, memos with the recipients' names affixed are sent via inter-office mail and each recipient initials and dates the memo after reading it. Then the recipient either sends it on to its next destination or returns it to its originator, completing the feedback loop and informing the message sender that all involved parties have gotten the message. These days, most companies rely upon e-mail for disseminating important information and memos. The information is delivered almost instantaneously; it is delivered without the intervention of a third party; it's delivery is confirmed (with time and date) by the system; it is easily stored, printed out and forwarded; and it can be responded to immediately or later, at a more opportune time. In short, it is the most perfect system yet devised for corporate communications. And yet several administrators say they do not utilize the Internet for internal communications, despite the existence of a perfectly sound system. One principal stated: "E-mail isn't part of my world."

One Board of Education member, a former IBM employee, noted the need for Internet-based communications, but theorized that some administrators might not feel comfortable with computers—hence their reluctance to use them. "I think more computer communication is needed. At IBM (e-mail) eliminated a lot of problems and errors in communications...(Some district staff) are using e-mail but we have a lot of people in our system who are not computer literate," he said.

...Administration

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- 1) Conduct an assessment of current internal communications practices and determine the best—i.e. the most reliable, flexible and appropriate—means of communicating between administrators.
- 2) Implement the new system—preferably an Internet-based system—as policy, requiring all administrators to use it for important notifications, memos and information sharing. If an e-mail system is implemented, senders can require receivers to send an e-mail receipt for verification purposes. (Verbal directives, which are at times necessary, should be confirmed later via the new system.)
- 3) Assess administrators' computer literacy and capabilities. Provide appropriate training where necessary.
- 4) Central office administrators should meet directly with principals on a regular, perhaps monthly, basis. Since both parties have complained of “mixed” and “unread” messages, these sessions might help re-open lines of effective communication.
- 5) Central office administrators should meet amongst themselves to fashion consistent directives with “one voice” before disseminating them to the building administrators or district staff.
- 6) Building level standards should be established for public relations. Principals should be given clear direction on what's expected from them and their staff in this regard, with a delineation established between building level and district responsibilities.

VII. Board of Education

A. Meetings

The five-member Board of Education generally meets to deliberate district business twice per month. It normally meets on Wednesdays at the district's Administration Building at 11 College Avenue, except for some occasions when sessions are held in neighborhood school buildings. Members of the public are encouraged to speak on agenda items at the beginning of the meeting for up to three meetings with a total period of 30 minutes allotted for this purpose; they may speak on any district subject at the conclusion of the meeting. Once prepared by district administrators, agendas are distributed to the print media by District Clerk Maria McCabe.

Perhaps by necessity—due to the high number of personnel and contractual matters contained within it—the agendas tend to be laden with legal, educational and “coded” entries that make them difficult for the lay public to navigate. This issue was discussed briefly by the board during a June 8 meeting after a board member cited feedback from the public claiming that the agendas do not adequately explain and/or describe matters under deliberation.

Several parents, PTA officials and community leaders expanded upon these sentiments during interviews for this report. For the most part, they said, the meetings are not conducive to public participation. They cited a host of criticisms, from the time that the public portion of the meeting tends to begin to the “language” used in conducting the board’s business. (In response to public concerns, the board recently began the public portion of its meetings at 7:30, half an hour earlier than before.)

One community non-profit leader pinned the problem on the “protocol” adopted by the board and not the board itself. In particular, she said, the lengthy executive sessions that precede the public portion of the meetings are both confusing and distracting to those unfamiliar with the board. “For parents, or the public who have never attended a board meeting, it could be very confusing to them and may even appear rude for the members of the board to exit the room to deliberate on particular topics and give no explanation as to when they will return,” she said.

“As a working person, the meetings are late and last a very long time...The board has very fine people on it and I have no problem with the people, just the protocol.” To combat this, she suggested that the board hold periodic orientations to help the public understand how the board conducts its business.

Several PTA leaders expressed the sense that district meetings tend to be inaccessible, uninviting and difficult to understand. Despite attending many board meetings, one PTA president said she and other parents felt as though they could not understand what was being conveyed by board members because of the “scholarly way” the information was presented. “It goes over my head,” she said, adding, “Parents feel intimidated.” The PTA leader suggested that the board notify the public—through newsletters or other media vehicles—of significant topics to be addressed at upcoming board meetings, arming constituents with information in advance.

Another PTA president said he’s attended some board meetings in the past, but no longer does, considering them a “waste of time.” The board, he says, “speaks to people on a level where they don’t understand” and he believes the public is given too little time to express themselves given the meeting format. He suggested that the board hold a monthly session with parents outside of the regular meeting schedule. At this forum parents would be able to speak out and “actually be heard” on issues that they are concerned about.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the consistently low attendance at meetings and the impressions of parent representatives, it is clear that many residents do not view the district’s Board of Education meetings as hospitable venues for their involvement. It is just as clear that the board is somewhat shackled to protocols and legal requirements in conducting district business—lengthy executive sessions, unfortunately, are the rule when dealing with so many personnel and contract issues.

However, in order to bridge what appears to be a schism between itself and the public it serves, the

...Meetings

board might consider steps to open dialogues with community and parent representatives. Heeding suggestions by some of the PTA leaders mentioned above could demonstrate the board's desire to listen to parent concerns. It might also encourage greater participation at board meetings.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

1) Twice during the school year—perhaps replacing two scheduled workshop sessions—conduct a public information meeting and community forum designed to explain district workings as well as tap into community concerns. Board members and district officials would be on hand to answer constituent questions regarding the running of the district and concerns would be noted for review at later board meetings.

2) Produce meeting agendas that contain more explanative content, wherever legally possible.

3) Prior to each meeting, issue a synopsis of the salient issues to be deliberated at that meeting. The summary should be posted a few days ahead of the meeting on the district website, sent to the media and, when possible, included in a district newsletter or handout.

4) Invite leaders of community groups with a stake in local education to give short presentations at board meetings, again to encourage dialogue and involvement.

B. Policy Manual Review

The Board of Education and administrative staff have been reviewing all district policies over the last several months (a positive development and effort to consolidate and update thousands of policies formed over many decades.)

In July, 2005 the board received notice from the NYS School Boards Association that its Policy Services Department had completed a review of the newly minted/updated policy manual, with all proposed policy changes approved by the School Boards Association. In the cover letter, the association's deputy director for policy services wrote: "The final product includes all revisions communicated to our department, and reflects the spirit, managerial style and practices of your district."

The auditor looked at all policies that appeared to involve communications, whether they be internal or external in nature. It should be noted that those policies that were not revised in some way by the policy review committee were not a part of the manual received for review and that they were not a part of the binder provided. Those policies must be requested individually by number or title in order to be reviewed. It is suggested that the final version of the policy manual include all policies and be available for public inspection and the use of district staff at several locations. These should also be publicized and promoted (including the district website.)

1) Policy 1000—School Community Relations Goals. Lists five general goals for community relations that are, in themselves, strong standards for community involvement. As is often the case with general goals, how they are carried out is key. The fourth goal: "To ascertain the community's opinions and desires with respect to operations of the school system, and to incorporate that knowledge into its actions..." does not give any guideposts for how to accomplish its stated aim.

2) Policy 1100—Public Information Program. Policy is not clear about who should serve as the spokesperson for board or district policy regarding "important matters" and it does not designate an office or vehicle for disseminating information that the district may deem important. "The Board will

determine which of its official actions have sufficient community impact and interest to warrant special release; the Board alone will release to the media those matters of importance. Actions of lesser importance may be released by the Superintendent of Schools who shall report such actions as they have been recorded in the minutes of the Board meetings and upon request of media representatives." This does not seem to be the practice of the current board, with Watson or Merritt generally acting as district spokesmen on a case-by-case or availability basis. In several years, this auditor, while working as a member of the local press corps, does not recall an instance where the board issued a press release or held a press conference for that matter. While it may be difficult, a policy should be crafted that clearly delineates roles and responsibilities in terms of representing the board and/or the district to the media.

3) Policy 1110—School Sponsored Publications. This policy is aimed at maintaining appropriate communications with the various constituencies within the educational community. It calls for the creation and distribution of handbooks for administration, faculty and students. This is a positive goal that appears to be either under development or underway. However, a second part of the policy calls for the "periodic preparation and distribution of internal communication documents which shall keep the staff apprised of happenings within the school district." Other than the occasional FYI, there does not appear to be an employee newsletter or other publication designed to accomplish this policy goal.

4) Policy 1205—Correspondence to Board Members. (Missing clause or typo after "whereupon" in the second sentence.) Board of Education President Merritt earlier expressed concern about this same scenario, namely when correspondence comes to a board members home or work place. Also, the policy encourages the public to correspond with board members and the superintendent but does not provide direction regarding correspondence addressed to officials' homes, only saying that those officials are not responsible for addressing in any official capacity such letters. This leaves the official to decide how and if he/she responds to correspondence received

...Policy Manual Review

anywhere other than the district offices. While it allows for discretion in some cases, it could also lead to problems down the line if an unwitting member of the public assumes (incorrectly) that his/her letter has gotten to the board. Also, there is not provision in this policy for e-mail messages, which are becoming a primary vehicle of communication for many people. Lastly, the policy cross references four other policies concerning complaint-handling procedures when explaining the protocol for processing and responding to correspondence. However, it does not address those types of letters in which the writer is not complaining, only seeking information. Under the policy as written, responsibility for responding to queries is not delineated. Good public relations dictates that it should be.

5) Policy 1900—Parental Involvement. Policy aimed at meeting parent involvement requirements under Title I funding guidelines. Calls for many avenues of involvement and engagement with district parents; not clear how this matches with actual practice in the district. A checklist of requirements and steps taken toward implementation would be helpful.

6) Policy 2260—Citizens Advisory Committees. Calls for the inclusion of CAC's, where possible, for direction, feedback and community opinion on district goals and initiatives. "The success of the school system depends, to a large extent, on open channels of communication between the school community and the community at large. Citizens advisory committees are particularly useful in this respect..." CAC's in the district have been relatively inactive in recent years despite significant changes and major challenges facing the district. Much like the PTA's, which have fallen into a lethargic state, the CAC's help to invigorate two-way communication within the district and should be encouraged for that reason alone.

7) Policy 2265—Shared Decision Making and School-Based Planning. (Typo—"Adoption date"—in the second sentence.) The policy outlines a plan—assumably required by State education department—for the involvement of parents, teachers, administrators and the Board in decision-making and planning on unstated district matters.

It stipulates that the plan called the "Plan for Participation by Teachers and Parents in School-based Planning and Shared Decision-Making" (reviewed every two years by the state education department) should be available at "each school and at the central district office; individual copies of the plan will be provided upon request." We are not certain about this level of availability of the plan or that its existence has been promoted in any way.

8) Policy 2370—Public Participation at Board Meetings. Under the rules governing members of the public addressing the board during meetings, the third rule stipulates that "no person may be heard who is not a resident" but is followed by an asterisk. However, no corresponding entry can be found to explain the asterisk. Also, no provision is made with respect to answering questions that may be addressed to the board or district staff. From a public relations standpoint, it is advisable to designate someone or an office to respond to questions from the public, otherwise they may feel unheeded and think their involvement is a waste of time. (This has been a sentiment expressed by various parents interviewed during this study.)

9) Policy 2410—Formulation, adoption, amendment of policies. Typo—"Adoption date"—in third sentence.

10) Policy 2450—Policy Dissemination. (Typo—"Adoption date"—in second sentence.) Calls upon the superintendent to distribute complete copies of the policy manual to the "...high school library, district offices, the public library and other central locations to ensure that district policies are available to the public." (Check to see if this has been done.)

11) Policy 2700—Board Staff Communications. One sentence policy appears undeveloped. "The board of education encourages good Board-Staff communications in order to maintain a healthy working environment which foster the best possible educational opportunities for the school district."

12) Policy 3230—Organization Charts. Such a chart, as of the beginning of this study, was not available.

Interviewed in Support of this Communications Audit:

Board of Education Members:

Stanley Merritt
 Carol Bogle
 Thomas Jefferson
 Ellen Staino (discussion only)
 Greg Charter (discussion only)

District Administrators:

Robert Watson Sr., Superintendent
 Dwight Paine, Assistant to the Superintendent
 Dr. Fern Aefsky, Assistant Superintendent
 Karen Markeloff, Assistant Superintendent
 Dr. Helen Blankenship, Director of Compensatory Programs
 Nancy Miller, Public Relations manager

Principals:

Robert Murphy, High School
 Carl Pabon, Middle School
 Nadine Jackson-Ivey, Clinton Elementary
 Anthony Lupoli, Morse Elementary
 Thomas Hartford, Columbus Elementary
 Lisa Thompson (with James Foster)
 Warring Elementary
 Sam Letterii, Smith Elementary
 Brenda Alston, Circle of Courage

Teachers:

Barry Kaufmann, PPSTA president
 Debbie Kardas (8th Grade Math, PMS)
 Filipa Antunes (3rd Grade, Clinton Elementary)
 Greg Hanson (business, PHS)
 Stephanie Green (3rd Grade, Morse Elementary)
 Debby Brooks (art, PMS)

Steering Committee/Parents:

Ann Harmuth
 Susan MacAvery

Hispanic Issues:

Jose Morales, president AHORA
 Robert Mallory, treasurer AHORA
 Carmen Vazqueztell, director bi-lingual education
 Newburgh School District
 Dr. O'Connor, deputy superintendent
 Newburgh School District

PTA Representatives:

Arthur Turner
 Alyssia Green
 Leola Ruffin
 Eileen Travis

Community/Non-profit Leaders

Shirley Adams, Catherine Street Community Center
 Desmond Murray, Marist College Internship Coordinator
 Robert Wright, Nubian Directions
 John Flowers, Community Organizer
 Rose Wiley, Ivy Academy

Others:

Leo Opdycke, educational activist
 Stephanie Griffin, web consultant
 Heather Adams, director "Community Connect"
 New York State School Boards Assoc.