

Synopsis:

“Without the rain, there would be no rainbow” is the quote that comes to mind to describe the journey the Maize USD 266 Communications Department has been on over the course of the past few years. Prior to 2008, the department was humming along as part of a growing suburban district with a broad base of support from parents and patrons alike.

In 2008, the storm blew in when the long-time Superintendent retired and an Interim Superintendent was hired. Things suddenly weren't second nature anymore causing a “wake-up” call for us to take a step back and take a critical look at the communications activities happening in the district.

Knowing that a permanent Superintendent would be hired for the 2009-10 school year, the first order of business was to gain support from the Board of Education and administration to conduct a NSPRA Communications Audit in February 2009. This audit was pivotal to the future success of not only the communications efforts in the district but also to the success of the incoming Superintendent, Doug Powers, in July 2009. Using the findings of the audit, a formal, comprehensive communications plan was written for the 2009-10 school year. After reviewing the positive results of the 2009-10 plan, this year's communications plan and goals were adopted by the Board of Education in August 2010.

Thanks to a formalized planning process, the storm has passed and the “pot of gold” at the end of our rainbow includes tangible things like a new brand/logo for the district, an updated autodialing system, a revamped patron newsletter, a completely redesigned web site, and a new staff Intranet site. The intangible rewards are a renewed sense of pride in the district and more buy-in from key stakeholders including administration, Board of Education members, patrons and staff.

Research

Maize USD 266 has a strong reputation in the Wichita community and has experienced steady, and at times, booming, growth for the past 25+ years. During this time of growth, the district was fortunate to have solid, long term leadership and a cohesive Board of Education. In 2007, long time Superintendent Craig Elliott announced he would be retiring after serving the district for 26 years. The Board of Education hired an Interim Superintendent for a period of two years. Knowing that a permanent Superintendent would be hired in the 2009-10 school year, the Communications Director advocated for NSPRA to conduct a Communications Audit to help map the district's future communications plans.

In February 2009, Karen Kleinz, APR conducted the audit. Prior to her visit, she analyzed samples of materials used to communicate with various audiences. She also reviewed the district and school web sites, demographic data, budget information, media coverage, etc. Nine focus groups were conducted with a variety of internal and external audiences including parents, business leaders and staff.

The focus group results confirmed that the perception of Maize USD 266 is highly positive. The district is known for its quality teachers and staff, student achievement aided by a quality academic program, strong parent/community involvement, a commitment to using technology and state of the art facilities.

Areas needing attention included having electronic communication tools up-to-date and user friendly, a more user-friendly web site and improving message consistency across the district. Specific advice for the incoming Superintendent included being visible and approachable, communicate clearly and consistently, and expand the circle of advisors he listens to, including the creation of a communications advisory council.

Planning

Prior to the communications audit, two projects were already underway: redesigning the district logo/brand for roll-out in the 2009-10 school year and upgrading the district's autodialing system. Designs for the district logo were tested in the focus groups. Elements from the tested designs were used by the graphic artist and logo committee to come up with the final logo that was launched in August 2009. The autodialing system was upgraded from an in-house multi line phone system which literally took an entire day to contact all the households in the district to the state-of-the art system designed by Blackboard Connect.

Just prior to the focus groups being conducted, the Board of Education announced the hiring of Superintendent Doug Powers for the 2009-10 school year. The timing on this was exceptional, because Superintendent Powers had the opportunity to provide input on the questions asked in the focus groups. In May 2009, the results from the audit were shared with the BOE and the logo was also adopted by the board. During the summer months, the Communications Director used the audit results to develop the 2009-10 Communications Plan. Elements of the plan included a demographic summary of external and internal audiences, a situation analysis and goals for improving communication with both internal and external audiences.

Internally, the focus was two-fold: increasing the number of staff members who cited a district communication vehicle as a primary source of information and increasing the number of staff members who feel optimistic and connected to the school system. Externally, the goals focused on satisfaction with online communication received from the district, optimism with the future of the district and understanding of major initiatives happening in the district. A goal was also written to establish ongoing research to monitor the success of communications efforts internally and externally.

Implementation/Communication

The following components of the Communications Plan were implemented from August 2009-July 2010:

- Discontinued monthly Insider newsletter and replaced it with redesigned employee Intranet, E-Connect, as the informational resource for employees.
- Developed informational sheets and talking points on major initiatives and emerging issues happening in the district.
- Developed and maintain a staff database in Blackboard ConnectEd to enable timely emergency notifications to staff via phone/email.
- Held an All Staff Pep Assembly and BBQ lunch to introduce the new Superintendent and to roll out the new logo/brand for the district.
- Coordinated with Superintendent for a "Job a Month" campaign. He spent one day a month in various jobs throughout the district: custodian, maintenance worker, food service, front office secretary, technology, bus driver/transportation, teacher, classroom para and police officer.
- Added texting as an option for parents and staff to receive emergency information from automated calling system.
- Began redesign process for district and building level websites. Launched new site in December 2010.

- Redesigned district and building level parent newsletters using Constant Contact.
- Revamped patron newsletter, the *Maize Messenger*, to a four color publication mailed to all households in the district three times per year.
- Worked with Maize Chamber of Commerce to host pancake feed/ribbon cutting ceremony for new facilities on south campus of school district in conjunction with the annual Maize Fall Festival.
- Coordinated with Superintendent for him to meet 100 key communicators in his first 100 days on the job.
- Established a Communications Advisory Council comprised of parents and staff to receive feedback on communications tools used in the district and to set annual communications goals.

Evaluation

District wide parent and staff surveys were conducted to evaluate goals outlined in the Communications Plan. All parents and staff in the district received an online survey.

Goal #1: By May 2010, 65% of Maize USD 266 employees will cite a district communication vehicle as his/her primary source of information.

Result: 67% of staff who completed the survey cited a district communication vehicle.

Goal #2: By May 2010, 65% of Maize USD 266 employees will indicate they are optimistic about the direction of the district and feel connected to the school system.

Result: 82% of staff who completed the survey either strongly agreed or agreed with the following statement: "I feel optimistic about the future of the district."

Goal #3: By May 2010, 75% of parents will indicate they are satisfied with online communication received from the district.

Result:

Communication Tool	% indicating "Excellent" or "Very Good" in parent survey
Automated Phone System	90%
District Emails	93%
Online District Parent Newsletter	84%
Online Building Parent Newsletter	76%
District Web Page	65% (Note: new web site launched after survey was completed)
Online Portal to Student Database	85%

Goal #4: By May 2010, 65% of patrons will indicate they are optimistic about the future of the district and have an understanding of major initiatives happening in the district.

Result: 87% of parents completing the survey either strongly agreed or agreed with the following statement; "I am optimistic about the future of Maize USD 266." 70% strongly agreed or agreed with the following statement, "I believe I have a good understanding of the major initiatives happening in the district."

Goal #5: Establish ongoing semiannual research to monitor success of communications efforts internally and externally.

Result: Staff climate survey completed in May 2010; Superintendent's parent survey completed in February 2010; established 16 member Communications Advisory Council that meets bimonthly to give feedback on communications tools used in the district and to set annual communications goals. The Superintendent and Communications Director have also had preliminary conversations with Patron Insight, Inc. to conduct a patron phone survey next fall in anticipation of an upcoming bond election.

The 2010-11 Communications Plan builds on the results of the 2009-10 results. Many of the same goals are included in this year's plan but the percentages have been increased to set the bar higher for gauging parent and staff satisfaction. In addition, new objectives are in place for each of the stated goals. Final analysis of this year's plan will be shared with the Board of Education this summer and the planning cycle will continue with 2011-12 goals going to the BOE in July 2011.