

NSPRA MARK OF DISTINCTION AWARD APPLICATION

Submitted by the Michigan School Public Relations Association

*Due
May 15, 2015*

The "Mark of Distinction" Recognition Program
for NSPRA Chapters

Entry Form

(Please include this information with each individual entry)

Chapter Name: Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA)

Chapter President: Micki O'Neil

President's contact information

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Right to Use Materials Statement

On behalf of the Chapter, I agree that NSPRA has the right to use any materials, project/program examples, etc., submitted in this entry in Association print/online publications, on the website, and as "best practice" resources for NSPRA chapters.

Signature of Chapter President: Micki O'Neil

Application Process Checklist

- Each entry includes this cover form and the Entry Specifics form.
- A single PDF that includes links to related supplemental materials and examples is attached. (If entering in more than one category, a single PDF for each category entry is attached or sent individually).
- Chapter president has signed the "right to use materials" statement on the entry form.
- Entry is delivered no later than May 15 and sent to awards@nspra.org, subject line "Mark of Distinction."

Mark of Distinction Entry Specifics

Chapter: Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA)

Please complete and include the information below for each individual entry

Section I: Membership Building

- Current number of chapter members _____
 - NSPRA-provided membership baseline number as of June 1 _____
 - Number of chapter members who belong to NSPRA as of April 30 _____
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Section II: Special Focus Areas

Category A – chapter has less than 50% NSPRA membership

Category B – chapter has 50% or more NSPRA membership

1. Professional Development/PR Skill Building

2. Special PR/Communication Program, Project or Campaign

One-time project/program (completed within a single year)

Continuing annual project/program (repeats each year; demonstrate new/improved/revised components)

Multi-year project/program (one-time only with defined start and end dates)

Multi-year phased project/program (components implemented in clearly defined phases each year)

3. Coalition-Building/Collaborative Communication Effort

2015 National School Public Relations Association Mark of Distinction Award

The [Michigan School Public Relations Association](#) (MSPRA) currently has 143 members, of which about 43 are NSPRA members. That means MSPRA falls in Category A: Chapter has less than 50% NSPRA membership. This year, we are submitting an entry under Section II: Special Focus Areas: Professional Development/PR Skill-Building.

Section II: Special Focus Areas

1. Professional Development/PR Skill-Building –

Each year, the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA) plans and provides a variety of programs and activities to support the professional growth and status of its members and improve the communication skills of Michigan educators including administrators, board members, teachers and support staff. This submission includes four examples of professional growth support: A) MSPRA's Annual Conference, B) Two Drive-In Conferences, C) MSPRA's Annual Communication Contest, and D) The Outstanding Superintendent Communicator Award and Gold Medallion Award.

This entry shows documentation and evidence of chapter programs/activities, including:

- 1) Impact of overall year-long effort (page 3)
- 2) Statement of chapter goals and objectives for programs/activities (page 2)
- 3) Documentation and copies of conference/workshop/meeting programs and agendas, marketing materials, tip sheets and/or presentations distributed or made available to participants (See links throughout narrative.)
- 4) Examples of specific programs/activities for contests and awards (page 10)
- 5) Identification of target audience and participation/attendance (pages 4,8 and 9)
- 6) Documentation/demonstration of measurable outcomes, effectiveness and success of the program/activity (See annual conference evaluation link and drive-in conference evaluation link in narrative.)
- 7) Explanation of how program/activity relates to NSPRA's Goals and Objectives (page 3)
- 8) Other relevant examples of chapter's professional development/PR skill-building efforts (page 11)

Michigan School Public Relations Association

Overview of MSPRA Professional Development & Skill-Building Activities

Professional development and skill building is a major goal of the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA). As an association, we focus a great deal of our human and financial resources in this area. The results are some of the best communication skill-building offerings in the state. The strength of our efforts aids in our membership retention and, despite a slowed economy, continues to drive conference attendance and contest participation.

Our primary professional development activities are:

- Our Annual Conference offers two days of intensive skill-building sessions, networking and learning.
- Our Regional Drive-in Conferences feature topical workshops with expert speakers to equip members with knowledge and skills.
- Our Annual Communication Contest is a competition to recognize member skills and encourage sharing of high-quality projects and programs. One part of the contest includes an Outstanding Superintendent Communicator Award to recognize the critical role of communication at the top of our organizations and to showcase the state's best examples.

The MSPRA Board appoints a minimum of three members to Professional Development initiatives: one to manage the Annual Conference, one to manage MSPRA's Communication Contest, and the third to serve as a resource for APR Certification. Typically, an additional 1-3 board members are either conference co-chairs, assist with the contest, or coordinate regional drive-in conferences.

The Board has several goals for its professional development activities. For the annual conference and drive-in sessions, these include:

- Building skills for all levels of members, from those who are new to the profession to those with many years of experience.
- Preparing members to address current hot topics in Michigan education.
- Networking to strengthen professional relationships.
- Recognizing the skills and sharing the successful strategies of our contest winners.
- Sharing some of the topics, trends, and speakers heard at the National School Public Relations Association conference. This year, two of our annual conference speakers Kelly Middleton and Julie Ewart, and one of our drive-in conference presenters, Zac Rantz, presented at NSPRA conferences.

And, MSPRA's Communication Contest aims to:

- affirm school districts' communication efforts.
- inform districts on how they can improve their communication efforts.
- provide a venue to exchange best practices among those providing communication services in Michigan's public schools.

Together, the Communication Contest, Annual Conference and Regional Drive-in Conferences provide unparalleled opportunities for members and interested others to learn about and improve upon their communication skills. All of these activities generate widespread participation from communicators, educators and staff members across the state.

The impact of this year's effort is reflected in the 143 registrations for our three conferences plus nearly 90 others who participated in training that members provided in other venues on behalf of MSPRA. And, if this year is similar to last year, we anticipate that nearly 70 entries will benefit from judges' comments as part of MSPRA's Communication Contest.

Evaluations from all these activities are mined for improvement ideas and member suggestions. And, every few years, these activities are reinvented to ensure their relevance, value to our members and high quality of programming. We are using social media and technology to promote our organization and events, and finding new ways to use these tools for professional development as well.

Our reputation for professionalism and excellence means we are the group other state education-related associations turn to for communication advice, toolkits, presentations and workshops for their members. Our board members can be found at the conferences and meetings of many of these partner organizations, helping to equip other members of the school family with the communication skills they need.

MSPRA'S professional development activities mirror the goals and objectives of NSPRA.

- MSPRA is the go-to organization for strategic communication.
- MSPRA is a leader in the use of technology to advance education through responsible communication.
- MSPRA provides valuable services and resources to our members to help them acquire and sharpen the skills they need to:
 - ✓ plan and implement an effective public relations program.
 - ✓ be recognized and valued as critical members of school/district leadership teams.

Our workshops, sessions and speakers are chosen to build the abilities of our members and members of the school family. Every contest entry helps advance the use of the RACE (RPIE) formula as well as shine a bright light on our profession and excellent communication practices.

Through purposeful planning and expert implementation, our chapter aims to elevate the role of school communication, the skill of our members (and their co-workers) and the value we each bring to our schools and communities.

The 2015 Annual MSPRA Conference

This year, MSPRA held its annual two-day conference “[*Building Relationships that Spark Student Success*](#)” on March 12 and 13, 2015 at the Eagle Eye Banquet Center near East Lansing, Michigan. A total of 54 people including presenters, members, vendors and others attended the conference.

We promoted the annual conference with a printed [postcard](#) that was sent via U.S. mail to members and interested others. We followed that mailing with regular conference teaser and reminder emails ([see sample](#)) that included an attached conference [registration form](#) and a link to MSPRA’s website.

Unique Features

Four unique features were part of MSPRA’s 2015 Annual Conference:

- 1) This year, we had Kelly Middleton, Superintendent of Newport Independent Schools in Kentucky, serve as our keynote speaker on both days. The first day, Kelly spoke to us about “*Building Relationships that Spark Student Success.*” The second morning, Kelly taught us about “*Recovering from Mistakes.*”
- 2) This year, we stayed together in the same large room for the morning of the first day to facilitate networking and enhance the group experience. In the afternoon of the first day we offered two pairs of breakout sessions, featuring three topics, each. (“*Building Support Through Video*” was offered during both time slots.) The second day we reconvened in our large group and remained in that configuration, for the duration of the conference, so that we could all benefit from the day’s speakers.
- 3) We were pleased to have four sponsors for this year’s conference: Foxbright: Smarter school websites; kdn, VIDEOWORKS, INC. (broadcast TV, video production, and post production); School Messenger (notification service); and CrisisGo (mobile emergency app). Our sponsors and their displays were in the same meeting room as our large group sessions, which gave them ready and easy access to our members. Plus, we gave each sponsor time for a mini-presentation (3-5) minutes at one of our designated breaks as part of their sponsorship “package.” The designated breaks were sprinkled throughout the two days.
- 4) We had presenters who brought us both state and national communication perspectives. Julie Ewart from Region V of the U. S. Department of Education and Casandra Ulbrich, Ph.D., from Michigan’s State Board of Education, both helped us view our work in the context of the bigger picture.

The Annual Conference—Day One

The conference convened with our first keynote speaker, Kelly Middleton, Superintendent of Newport Independent Schools in Kentucky who taught us about “Building Relationships that Spark Student Success.” Kelly used images, activities and information from his books: *Who Cares? Improving Public Schools Through Relationships and Customer Service* and *Simply The Best: 29 Things Students Say the Best Teachers Do Around Relationships* to help us realize that we must be intentional in our efforts to focus on relationships and customer service. ([Kelly’s handouts](#) begin on page 3 of this pdf.)

Mid-morning after a break (and vendor mini-presentation), we heard from Casandra Ulbrich, Ph.D., a member of Michigan’s State Board of Education about “[Influencing Public Policy.](#)”

She helped us gain insight into public policy and discover how school communicators can build relationships with those who help shape it.

At lunch, we introduced participants to [FRED](#) (Free Resources for Educators), a password-protected site stocked with free resources for Michigan educators. The file system allows for an exchange of information among superintendents, school administrators and school communicators. We also encouraged participants to submit stories to [InspirED Michigan](#), an online magazine designed to share stories of innovation, inspiration and hope happening every day in Michigan's public schools.

After lunch, we engaged in [Table Talk](#), a facilitated conversation about the Governor's Education Agenda.

After Table Talk, participants chose from two sets of break-out sessions: The first session of the first set was entitled, "*Who Cares? Bringing Everyone to the Table.*" In this session designed for superintendents, board members and PR Professionals, Kelly Middleton shared how to attract and engage community partners to gain more support for our schools.

The second session of the first set entitled, "*Building Support Through Video,*" featured Ron Yanik, Consultant for kdn VIDEOWORKS, INC. Ron used examples of kdn's work to demonstrate how schools can successfully use video to garner support. This presentation was repeated in the second set of break-out sessions.

The third session of the first set entitled, "[Getting It Right: Internal Communications](#)," was presented by Karen Heath, Supervisor for Communications at Berrien Regional Educational Service Agency. Karen shared helpful tips and strategies that she has successfully used in her intermediate school district.

The second set of break-out sessions included the repeat of "*Building Support Through Video.*" Participants also had the option to attend "*Simply The Best: 29 Things Students Say the Best Teachers Do Around Relationships,*" presented by Kelly Middleton. Or, they could have chosen "*Writing & Editing—[Show Me the People: Writing School News with a Heartbeat](#),*" presented by Charles Honey, a freelance writer for the School News Network and a columnist for MLive and the Grand Rapids Press. Back by popular demand from last year's conference, Charley taught participants how to keep people at the forefront of our writing.

At the end of the second set of break-out sessions, we reconvened into our large group and learned about statewide hot topics, including: "[What's Going on in Lansing? And Proposal 1: Fund Schools and Fix Roads](#)" from Jen Smith, Director of Government Relations for the Michigan Association of School Boards. Jen explained how the controversial, statewide proposal set for a May 5th vote would impact our roads, schools and municipalities.

We then adjourned our formal agenda and transitioned to the evening's activities.

MSPRA Annual Conference Evening Networking Event

At our annual MSPRA Conference, we start early and learn late, but take a break in the evening for building our relationships. Goals for the evening are for fun, but also connection. The more our members—who come from across the state—connect with each other, the

broader their professional networks grow. And, professional networks are key to successful careers. In addition, we want to showcase our conference location, so activities have ranged from a museum after-hours visit to a live theatre performance to a special dinner venue.

Again this year, our conference hotel was adjacent to the Eastwood Towne Centre and we took advantage of the proximity. In the early evening, participants enjoyed a meal at one of two sign-up dinner options—both at the Eastwood Towne Centre. One served seafood and the other offered Mediterranean cuisine. Both settings were conducive to candid conversation, allowing us to interact in a relaxed atmosphere.

Then, we returned to the hotel for an After-Glow Event where we enjoyed desserts and beverages and watched excerpts from the “*Above the Mark*” video (that some of us first saw at NSPRA) which spurred some interesting discussion. We also enjoyed a lively exchange between school communication veterans and newbies (both to the field and to the conference).

The Annual Conference—Day Two

We began our second morning (after a vendor mini-presentation) with Kelly Middleton talking to us about “*Recovering from Mistakes.*” Kelly reminded us that mistakes happen in every organization. In public schools these mistakes tend to involve unrelenting social media chatter, packed board meetings, and TV news reporters. Kelly shared how schools can achieve service recovery in ways that ultimately enhance a school’s reputation and relationships, turning negative into positives.

After a break (and a vendor mini-presentation), Julie Ewart, Communication and Outreach Director for U.S. Department of Education Region V, reminded us that “[*Communication is Not a One-Way Street.*](#)” Julie helped us explore the opportunities for outreach and communication between the U.S. Department of Education and Michigan school communicators. She encouraged us to dialogue about issues and challenges impacting message, outreach and collaboration.

At lunch, MSPRA President Micki O’Neil presented the association’s [Annual Report](#) and showcased the winners of the 2014 MSPRA Communication Contest.

Following lunch (and the final vendor mini-presentation), we remained in our large group to hear the last session of the conference entitled, “[*Building a School Community Through Social Media*](#)” presented by Kate Snyder, APR and Principal Strategist of Piper & Gold Public Relations. Kate gave us examples of how districts can use social media to build a digital culture that celebrates student success and facilitates parent engagement. She also covered the benefits of using social media to connect, and how districts and teachers can avoid the dangers of digital.

After Kate’s presentation, the conference adjourned. Attendees went back to their districts feeling energized, connected, and better equipped to manage their work for the remainder of the school year.

The Annual Conference—In Conclusion

Overall, at our 2015 Annual Conference, we offered participants five large-group sessions on: 1) Building Relationships that Spark Student Success, 2) Influencing Public Policy, 3) Recovering from Mistakes, 4) Communicating with the U.S Department of Education, and 5) Building a School Community Through Social Media. We gave participants their choice of five break-out sessions on engaging community partners, building support through video, communicating internally, building relationships, and writing with a heartbeat. We also introduced them to four vendors through mini-presentations. And, we provided opportunities for formal and informal exchange of ideas through a facilitated table talk; two hosted sign-up dinners; and one after-glow gathering for discussing, relaxing and networking.

Overall, conference [evaluations](#) were very positive with most sessions rated between 4.0 and 5.0 on a 5.0 scale.

Some of the comments included: “I liked the variety of topics and that there was something for ISDs (*aka Michigan’s intermediate units*) and districts.” “Thank you for a great conference!” “Lots of great information to bring back to my daily work.”

We also gleaned some suggestions to improve our next conference.

MSPRA's 2014-2015 Drive-In Conferences

This past year, MSPRA also held two drive-in conferences. The first one, on [June 25, 2014](#), was: "[School Finance Basics: Everything Your Superintendent Wished You Knew.](#)" This 9 a.m.-1 p.m. session, with lunch, targeted Administrative Professionals and Administrative Assistants. Presenters Mike Hagerty, Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services at Kent Intermediate School District and Robert Dwan of the Michigan School Business Officials helped our participants gain insight and awareness into the tough decisions and options school face each year.

During the session, our 45 participants discovered how to:

- better help staff, parents and the community understand their district's financial picture
- avoid the common mistakes in communicating about bonds and millages.

After lunch, attendees learned about free resources in the "[Free, Free, Free](#)" session presented by Dianne Litzenburger from Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District.

Reactions to the June 25th drive-in conference were very positive, like the following post in the SCN Encourager 6/26/2014: "*MSPRA's school funding presentation rocked! Michigan's school funding process and projections may be rocky, but Mike Hagerty of the Kent ISD and Bob Dwan of MSBO gave an engaging and thoughtful overview on the topic...Even many of us who are "non-finance, non-math" types could see the all of the School Aid Act's moving parts coming together, despite more than a handful of legislative contradictions and other common sense defiers. ...Kudos, MSPRA! Make that double kudos! The homemade cookies... and the "helpful free stuff" presentation by Dianne Litzenburger of the Char-Em ISD were also winners in my book...*"

The second drive-in conference on [November 14, 2014](#) with MOSPRA member Zac Rantz from Nixa, MO, was a two-part, day-long offering. The morning session on "[Community Engagement](#)" from 9 a.m.-Noon, was followed by lunch, a message from our sponsor Blackboard, and an afternoon session from 1 p.m. - 4 p.m. on "[Crisis Communication.](#)" During the community engagement session, Zac gave us [tips](#) about generational differences, going mobile, key communicators, and informing people early. If people get their news from you first, they'll come back to you for more. Our goal is to be their first source of information.

In the second half of the day, participants discovered what to do (and not do) before, during and after a crisis. Zac reminded us that how we communicate now will determine how we communicate in a crisis. Unless a communication plan is part of our daily activities, we won't see its holes or how to improve it. Remember to use our key communicators (like hair stylists and barbers). Know our school policies related to what we can say about students and school personnel. We also need to plan for long-term communication and engagement after a crisis to make sure people feel heard.

As a bonus, each participant received an autographed copy of Zac's book, *Hindsight: Lessons learned from the Joplin tornado and other crisis events.*

[Evaluations](#) were also very positive for this drive-in conference. Twenty-seven of the 44 attendees completed an evaluation. Majority rated both the Community Engagement and Crisis Communication sessions as very useful and would recommend the sessions to others.

MSPRA's Annual Communication Contest

MSPRA provides opportunities for people who direct communication and public relations programs to:

- attend conferences and workshops designed to enhance skills in personal and organizational communication.
- exchange ideas and strategies with specialists from other school districts.

One of the best ways to exchange ideas and strategies is through [MSPRA's Communication Contest](#) for Publications, Campaigns and Electronic Media. Each year, MSPRA invites schools throughout Michigan to submit their best programs, campaigns, and communication products for a juried review. Product categories range from writing to print and interactive-media publications. In [2014](#), we had 69 entries. This year, MSPRA is transitioning to an online contest entry format using a commercial product called Pitch Burner. As a Board, we were impressed by the product and customer service responsiveness. The deadline for entries was May 15, 2015, but because it's a new, online system, the Board decided to extend the deadline to May 29, 2015. So, we will know more about members' experience with the product soon.

MSPRA's Gold Medallion Award

MSPRA's Gold Medallion Award recognizes outstanding programs or projects that advance responsible school communication. Entries may come from public and private schools, education agencies, regional MSPRA groups, and any public relations agency or private business serving education entities. In 2014, we had two winners: 1.) Fraser Public Schools for "Fraser Public Schools: 2013-2014 Enrollment Campaign" and 2.) Bloomfield Hills Schools for "On Schedule, On Budget" campaign. Our judges felt these entries did an excellent job of using the 4-step RACE (or RPIE) methodology when designing and executing their respective campaigns. These winners were announced at our Fall Drive-In Conference in November. The 2015 Gold Medallion Award deadline has also been [extended](#) to May 29, 2015.

MSPRA's Outstanding Superintendent Communicator Award

MSPRA's Outstanding Superintendent Communicator Award recognizes a superintendent for leadership in school district communication. Our deadline for the award this year has also been extended to May 29, 2015. So we will not be able to report on the winner for 2015 in this narrative.

However, we are pleased to report that last year's [co-recipient](#) of MSPRA's Outstanding Superintendent Communicator Award, Karen McPhee, former Superintendent of the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District and MSPRA member, is now serving as the Education Advisor for the State of Michigan's Governor Rick Snyder.

Other examples of increasing PR visibility and providing PR training

MSPRA members presented at other conferences and school districts on the importance of good public relations. Two examples of these presentations are:

1. On November 21, 2014 — Representing MSPRA, Past-Presidents Danelle Gittus and Gerri Allen presented a session the Michigan Institute For Educational Management (MIEM) Administrative Professionals Conference. The session attended by nearly 60 administrative professionals covered Six Key Strategies for Savvy Administrative Professionals including Customer Service and Media Communication.
2. On April 15, 2015 — Again representing MSPRA, (recently hired) MSPRA Executive Director Gerri Allen spoke on the [Six Key Strategies](#) for Savvy Administrative Professionals at an event honoring Administrative Professionals, hosted by Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District and coordinated by MSPRA member Dianne Litzenburger. This session drew nearly 30 administrative professionals from the area, including two school secretaries who flew over from Beaver Island to attend this after-hours event.

While there was no official evaluation, one of the April 15th participants sent a thank-you email that said, “I really enjoyed the presentation I went over the power-point list print-out that was included in our packets and have added some of the items you listed to my *list of things to do*. ... [Two of her six items included:]

2. Monitor social media--I found out I can get on Facebook at work (we didn't used to be able to) and quite frankly I don't look at it much at home, but I think it might be important to start looking at the school Facebook pages. ...
6. Accept that you have a key communication role--I am going to try harder to communicate with all parties when an event or change occurs that might involve them.”

These are tangible examples of the impact that MSPRA has through our professional development offerings.

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