CRISIS RESPONSE TO RANSOMWARE

NSPRA GOLD MEDALLION ENTRY
Crisis Communication Campaign

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PK12 Public School District | 17,500 students

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SYNOPSIS

On September 7, Highline Public Schools identified unauthorized activity on its network—later confirmed as ransomware—that disrupted school operations for six weeks.

The cyber incident disabled critical systems, including the Internet, student and employee information systems, transportation routing and communication tools. It also led to a three-day school closure and forced staff to operate without computers.

Highline's communications team quickly executed a crisis communication plan focused on transparency, clarity and trust. With limited technology, they pivoted to alternative methods—leveraging in-person meetings, printed materials, robocalls and media engagement—to keep families, staff and the community informed.

Research from previous community and staff surveys guided communication strategies, ensuring messages aligned with audience preferences. Staff received updates through supervisors, printed materials and text alerts. Families relied on emails, text and robocalls. The broader community was engaged via local media and direct mail.

Throughout the crisis, the district maintained a strong commitment to clear, proactive messaging. The team managed expectations regarding system recovery, mitigated misinformation and reinforced trust in leadership. They also worked closely with the technology team to align messaging and provide real-time updates.

By the end of the crisis response, Highline successfully reimaged more than 82% of staff devices, restored critical systems and ensured the majority of media coverage accurately reflected the Highline's messaging. Staff feedback indicated appreciation for transparency and frequent updates. Early indicators suggest continued community trust in Highline's leadership.

This crisis reinforced key lessons: the importance of having offline emergency plans, the need for adaptable communication strategies and the power of proactive engagement.

Highline's crisis response proved that even in a total digital blackout, strategic, multi-channel communication preserves trust and operational continuity.

September 4
First day of school for students in grades 1-12.

Saturday, September 7
Bad actor identified and access to network shutdown.

Sunday, September 8
Initial communication sent to staff and families.

September 9
School canceled, including first day of kindergarten.

September 10
School canceled.

September 11
School canceled.

September 12
Schools reopen, including first day of school for kindergarten.

October 3
Confirmed ransomware.

Week of October 11-18
All devices reimaged and passwords reset.

October 21
Internet and several network tools restored.

RESEARCH

When the technology team identified the bad actor on the network, they promptly disabled internet and access to our network and most digital tools. This shutdown remained in place through October 21.

We immediately assessed our available resources and identified the tools we could not access, including:

- Student information system (SIS)
- Employee information system
- Transportation routing system
- Health tracking system
- Google Suite (Drive, Docs, Slides, Sheets, etc.)
- Staff intranet

Staff were unable to access their district-issued laptops and desktops during this time. With these systems down, we recognized the need for alternative, analog solutions to maintain essential functions, such as attendance and internal communication.

AUDIT OF AVAILABLE TOOLS AND WORKAROUNDS

A few tools remained accessible, including the district website, staff email and family notification. School and district leaders with district-provided cell phones continued to have access to those devices. The technology team provided Wi-Fi hotspots and laptops to a handful of key staff members, including several communications team members.

AUDIENCE COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES

To ensure effective communication, we leveraged insights from two surveys:

- **Community Poll (June 2024)** – Surveyed 402 respondents, margin of error ±4.9% at the 95% confidence level.
- **SCoPE Survey (June 2023)** – Surveyed 721 respondents, confidence interval at 4.5% for parents and 6.9% for staff.

Findings from these surveys highlighted preferred communication channels:

- **Staff:** Email and verbal communication from supervisors or colleagues
- **Families:** Text and email
- **Community members:** Printed materials and local news media

COMMUNITY SENTIMENT AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

The poll also indicated that nearly twice as many residents view Highline favorably compared to those who do not, with 70% of residents aligning with Highline's strategic priorities. This trend has been consistent over several years through previous polls. With a levy expected in fall 2025 and a bond in fall 2026, it was crucial to maintain community support and execute a crisis communications plan that responds to the current situation while preserving trust, credibility and support.

SECONDARY RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION

Two weeks before our incident, the Port of Seattle faced ransomware. In June 2024, the Seattle Public Library was also targeted. Nearby school districts, Renton and Edmonds, had previously experienced similar cyber incidents. Leveraging our strong relationships with the communications leads at the Port and Edmonds, we sought their guidance immediately, applying lessons from their responses to strengthen our crisis communication strategy.

RESEARCH-BASED COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Based on the above research, the communications team developed a multi-channel approach to ensure information reached all audiences. This strategy informed our approach to message distribution. Staff primarily relied on email, along with verbal and printed updates from supervisors. To supplement these methods, staff received links to emails via text messages and robocalls. Families were updated through text and email. Community members engaged through printed communication and local media.

PLANNING

GOAL | Staff, families and community members have confidence and trust in Highline Public Schools to address the ransomware incident.

OBJECTIVES

- By October 21, staff will receive and understand laptop reimage instructions, ensuring at least 90% of district-issued devices are reimaged and back online.

- By December 2024, at least 90% of local media coverage will accurately reflect Highline's official messaging.

- By December 2024, a majority of qualitative feedback will reflect a positive sentiment about Highline's response to the ransomware incident.

- By February 2025, at least 5% of staff will utilize free credit monitoring services, exceeding industry standards.

- By December 2024, staff trust in leadership will increase by at least 5 percentage points for all employee groups from the previous all-staff survey.

STRATEGIES

To meet our objectives, the following strategies were implemented:

- Provide timely and transparent updates to families, staff and the broader community.

- Manage expectations regarding the recovery process and available resources.

- Mitigate misinformation by ensuring consistent messaging across available platforms.

- Anticipate questions and proactively address them through messaging.

- Support educators and staff in navigating temporary analog workarounds.

- Maintain trust in district leadership by demonstrating competence, empathy and responsiveness.

- Be proactive and responsive to media needs to ensure accurate and timely information dissemination.

- Partner closely with technology team to align messages and address concerns in real-time.

AUDIENCES

- *Primary audience:* School and district leaders, staff members, school board directors, families
- *Secondary audience:* Students, community members, members of the media, labor partners

ANALOG OPERATIONS

Without access to key operational tools, we closed school temporarily to develop an analog plan for managing operations. Cabinet worked closely with central office leaders and staff to develop an analog plan to meet all of our school operations needs before reopening schools. More details, including an example, are shared under implementation.

BUDGET & RESOURCES

For the first three weeks, all six communications team members focused solely on crisis response, totaling at least 720 staff hours. By early October, they resumed other duties while keeping crisis communications a priority.

Insurance is expected to cover printed materials and legal services for the communications team. Due to legal constraints, we cannot disclose additional cost details at this time. A full accounting report will be available after the cyber incident investigation is complete.

PLANNING

TIMELINE

We divided our crisis communication into four phases, each with specific strategies and messaging priorities.

Phase 1: Initial Disruption & Response
September 4-11
Acknowledge the incident, inform audiences, launch an immediate investigation, and provide initial guidance.
- Communication focused on transparency, initial incident details, commitment to safety and setting expectations.
- Immediate steps were taken to secure the network and assess the impact.

Phase 2: Analog Operations & Investigation
September 12-October 3
Deliver clear instructions and support materials regarding the analog operations of schools, along with providing updates on the investigation and system recovery process.
- Messaging emphasized the shift to analog operations, instructional continuity, and updates on system recovery.
- The investigation continued, with ongoing communication to manage expectations.

Phase 3: Reimage & Password Reset
October 11-18
Offer clear instructions on the system recovery progress, including step-by-step guides on the process.
- Staff were provided with clear guidance on device reimaging and password resets.
- Communication reassured employees about cybersecurity measures and next steps.

Phase 4: Restoration & Long-Term Response
October 21-Present
Share cyber security steps staff can take, technology department initiatives to improve security, progress on network issues and updates on the investigation.
- Ongoing updates focused on system restoration progress, security enhancements, and long-term prevention strategies.

KEY MESSAGES

VIEW COMPLETE KEY MESSAGES ONLINE

Within 48 hours of the incident, we contracted a legal expert who specializes in supporting K-12 school districts responding to cyber incidents. They provide ongoing feedback and guidance on our key messages. Since we were the third cyber incident in the region, we did not have to do as much public education about this with media. The linked key messages are the core messages we distributed about the incident. Additional key messages were developed for staff regarding specific guidance and instructions.

IMPLEMENTATION

To address the crisis, we focused on two priorities: sustaining operations through manual workarounds and ensuring clear, timely communication across all audiences.

ANALOG OPERATIONAL WORKAROUNDS

We developed manual workarounds to manage operations like attendance, transportation routes, student health records and care, internal communication.

Example: Attendance Tracking Without a Student Information System (SIS)
Typically, attendance is recorded digitally, with automatic absence notifications to parents. Without SIS, we implemented the manual process to the right.

This is one of many analog solutions used to maintain essential functions that we needed to clearly identify and communicate.

- School office staff print class rosters.
- Teachers mark attendance on printed rosters.
- School office staff make a photocopy of the attendance record.
- Central office staff collect and deliver records to technology staff.
- Technology staff input data into a spreadsheet.
- Communications uploads the data to ParentSquare and manually sends notifications.

IMPLEMENTATION

COMMUNICATION EXECUTION AND TACTICS

A comprehensive, multi-channel communication strategy was deployed to ensure timely, transparent and accessible updates for all audiences. Tactics were aligned with our identified strategies.

Cabinet & Leadership Teams

In-person briefings, email updates and direct staff engagement kept leaders aligned.

Cabinet & Leadership Engagement
- Twice-daily in-person briefings for Cabinet and senior leadership, including the Chief Communications Officer, during the first two weeks.
- Daily in-person meetings with select Cabinet members through the end of October.
- Pre-reopening in-person briefing for all school and district leaders and central office staff.
- Leaders leveraged district-provided cell phones to access emails with key messages which they reinforced with their school and department teams.
- One-on-one check-ins with leaders via phone, email and text to address concerns and provide support.

All Staff

Communication through in-person meetings, digital channels and printed materials.
- Daily in-person meetings and/or written updates from leaders to school and department staff.
- Urgent alerts via text and robocalls to staff's personal phones during school closures.
- Emails to all staff with critical updates.
- Updates posted on the district website and shared via ParentSquare notifications.
- Printed copies of updates were hand-delivered to schools and department sites.
- An FAQ webpage was updated several times a day and was linked in all communications.
- Printed guidelines and instructions distributed to worksites.

Union Leadership

- Regular check-ins with union leadership to align messaging and address concerns from representative staff.
- Prioritized union leadership in messaging cadence.
- Joint email and video messages from the superintendent and union leadership.
- Supported union-led outreach and messaging.

Families & Students

A multi-platform approach ensured students and families received consistent and accessible updates.
- ParentSquare notifications via text, email, robocall and posts.
- Social Media to inform of closures and tell the story of staff dedication and recovery.
- District website updates.
- An FAQ webpage was updated several times a day and was linked in all communications.
- Urgent alerts via text, email and robocalls provided immediate notifications for school closures.
- In-person updates from teachers.

Broader Community

Transparency was maintained through web updates and print communications.

Direct Communication
- FAQ webpage, updated several times a day.
- A mailer was sent to all residents, letting them know we were back online and improving cyber security.

Media Relations
- Direct reach out to local media contacts.
- Prompt responses to media inquiries.
- Active monitoring of media coverage to correct inaccuracies.
- Proactive messaging to counter misinformation, with staff, families and board members.
- Maintained open communication with media.
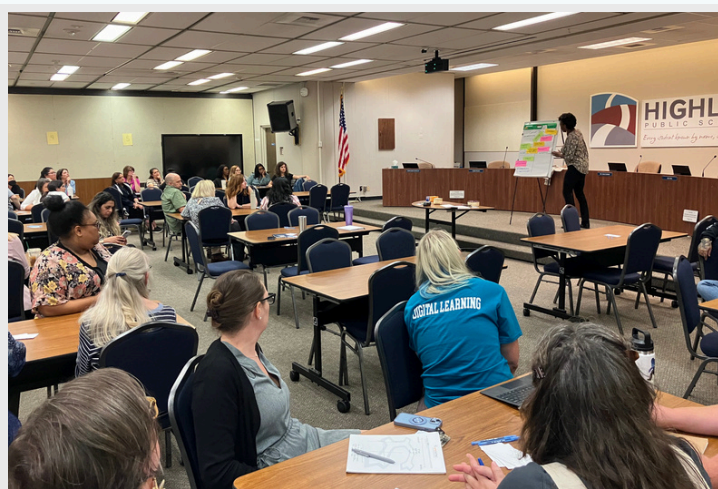
EVALUATION

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The ransomware incident required a rapid, strategic and adaptable crisis communications response. Through timely, transparent and multi-channel communication, we maintained trust with staff, families and the community.

Key Takeaways

- Clear, consistent messaging reduced uncertainty and reassured audiences.
- Effective collaboration between the communications and the technology teams ensured accurate, aligned messaging and real-time response to concerns.
- Increased cybersecurity awareness among staff as a long-term benefit.
- Adaptability and real-time adjustments were critical to responding effectively.

- Multi-channel communication (email, text, robocalls, print, in-person) ensured broad accessibility across all audiences.
- A strong partnership at the cabinet level fostered trust and collaboration in decision-making and was reflective in communication.
- An understanding of audience attitudes and communication preferences—established through prior research—enabled the team to develop a responsive and effective crisis communications plan.

EVALUATION OF OBJECTIVES

Objective 1

Objective: By October 21, staff will receive and understand laptop reimage instructions, ensuring at least 90% of district-issued devices are reimaged and back online.

Outcome: By October 21, our technology department estimates 82%, or 3,500 out of 4,251 district-issued devices, were re-imaged.

Successes: Reimage instructions were distributed through multiple channels. Central office staff facilitated the laptop check-in and check-out process and provided troubleshooting support to allow technology staff to focus on the reimage process.

Challenges: The majority of devices not reimaged by Oct. 21 were desktops. Reimaging desktops took longer than initially expected due to the additional time required for development and testing of the reimage source.

Objective 2

Objective: By December 2024, at least 90% of local media coverage will accurately reflect Highline's official messaging.

Outcome: Our media monitoring counted 166 local mentions of the cyber incident. All but two, from a single journalist, aligned with Highline's official messaging.

Successes: Proactive media engagement and strong relationships led to accurate reporting. As the third regional ransomware victim, we benefited from increased reporter awareness.

Challenges: One outlet prioritized sensationalism, requiring follow-up. The team balanced rapid response with message consistency across platforms.

Objective 3

Objective: By December 2024, a majority of qualitative feedback will reflect a positive sentiment about Highline's response to the ransomware incident.

Outcome: Feedback from staff and families overwhelmingly valued transparency and timely updates. School leaders expressed strong support for the messaging and clear expectations for communicating with their school teams.

Successes: Staff consistently voiced appreciation for clear and frequent communication. Families recognized and responded positively to the district's efforts to provide real-time updates.

Challenges: Some staff were frustrated by the six-week timeline for system restoration. clearer expectation-setting could have reduced concerns.

The phrase "for student safety" in initial communication led to misinterpretations of a physical threat to students. We clarified that "student safety" referred to ensuring critical school operations—such as accurate bus routes, emergency contact access, and attendance tracking—were functional before reopening. Future messaging should anticipate potential misinterpretations due to current climate and provide immediate context.

EVALUATION

OBJECTIVE 4

Objective: By February 2025, achieve a participation rate of at least 5% for staff utilizing free credit monitoring services, exceeding industry standards.

Outcome: By the end of February 2025, a total of 309 staff members, or 10.4% of Highline staff signed up for free credit monitoring, surpassing the 5% industry average following cyber incidents like this one.

Successes: Credit monitoring services were widely promoted via email, website updates, text messages and robocalls. Staff expressed appreciation for the district's proactive and no-cost approach.

Challenges: The investigation continues into the possible exposure of personal identifiable data. Further communication will follow if such data was exposed.

OBJECTIVE 5

Objective: By December 2024, staff trust in leadership will increase by at least 5 percentage points for all employee groups from the previous all-staff survey.

Outcome: The December all-staff survey showed an increase in trust in leadership across all employee groups. However, the 5 percentage point goal was met for only two of the three groups:
- District staff: +1 point to 62%
- School-based staff: +10 points to 62%
- Teachers: +6 points to 51%

Successes: Strengthening staff trust remained a core focus throughout the crisis. Messaging reinforced a commitment to transparency, and engagement efforts helped foster confidence in leadership.

Challenges: We need to do a better job at acknowledging the long-term impact of going offline and pausing priorities for two months. District staff carried the burden of analog processes, slowing trust growth. Continued recognition and support are key.

FUTURE CRISIS READINESS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Communications Without Infrastructure
Navigating a crisis with limited access to digital tools required rapid problem-solving and adaptability. Future plans must include contingencies for limited or no access to communication systems.

Managing Uncertainty & Maintaining Trust
Despite regular updates, frustration over system restoration timelines persisted. A strong relationship with the Teachers' Union played a key role in preserving trust.

The Challenge of Printed Communications
Distributing printed materials to all work sites required significant coordination and staff time, particularly for individuals outside the communications team. Future plans should consider streamlining distribution or identifying additional resources to support this effort.

When Crisis Plans Are Inaccessible
Pre-prepared crisis plans and templates were stored on Google, which was unavailable. Experience filled the gap, but having offline backups could strengthen future preparedness.

Crisis Response Is Constantly Evolving
Crisis response requires adaptability. The idea of a "return to normal" is an illusion—each crisis reshapes the landscape, requiring continuous adjustments to communication strategies. After COVID, many anticipated a return to stability (including us!). Instead, we've entered an era where disruption is the norm. With the current political climate, the rise in cybersecurity threats and other unforeseen crises in public K-12 education, adaptability is no longer a temporary necessity—it's the foundation of effective response. We must remain proactive, agile and prepared to meet challenges as they arise, knowing that stability is built through our ability to evolve.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Here's a snapshot of our implementation plan in action! The structured approach ensured clear timelines, accountability, and efficient execution.

Communication Plan - Tactics
Cyber Security Incident

Activity	Date	Time	Who	Notes/URL	Status
Sunday, September 8 Update					
Gather & review research	Sat, September 7	Ongoing	Tove		Finalized
Draft Key Messages	Sun, September 8	12:00 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform Board President & VP	Sun, September 8	12:00 PM	Ivan	Phone call	Finalized
Inform Cabinet	Sun, September 8	12:15 PM	Jenniffer		Finalized
Inform school board	Sun, September 8	12:45 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
Post staff expectations on website	Sun, September 8	1:15 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform Leadership Forum	Sun, September 8	2:00 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
Inform HEA Leadership	Sun, September 8	2:00 PM	Ivan		Finalized
Inform Labor Partners	Sun, September 8	2:00 PM	Chris L		Finalized
Text to all principals	Sun, September 8	2:30 AM	Jenniffer	School canceled, check email for detail, staff will be notified via email at 2:45pm	Finalized
Inform All staff Via Email	Sun, September 8	2:45 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook - Include report to workinfo	Finalized
Website news article	Sun, September 8	2:45 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform All Staff via ParentSquare	Sun, September 8	2:45 PM	Linda	Robocall, text (Urgent Alert)	Finalized
Inform All Families + Students	Sun, September 8	3:00 PM	Linda	Robcall, Text, Email (Urgent Alert)	Finalized
FlashAlert Notification	Sun, September 8	3:00 PM	Maria	Notifies local media	Finalized
Website pop up	Sun, September 8	3:00 PM	Tove		Finalized
Share on social media	Sun, September 8	3:15 PM	Nicole	Facebook, Instagram	Finalized
Notify PSSC District Partners	Sun, September 8	4:00 PM	Tove	emails comms directors (Jessica M	Finalized
Assign central office staff to schools for support	Sun, September 8	5:00 PM	Jenniffer		Finalized
Notify before and after school program providers	Sun, September 8	6:00 PM	Kisa		Finalized
Update LF with what to expect	Sun, September 8	7:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Draft Monday Messages	Sun, September 8	9:00 PM	Tove	Staff Message Drafts / Family Message Drafts	Finalized
Update LF with Synergy info	Sun, September 8	10:00 PM	Tove		Finalized
Monday, September 9 Update					
Pause social media	Mon, September 9	8:00 AM	Nicole		Finalized
Update Key Messages	Mon, September 9	11:45 AM	Tove		Finalized
Update draft messages based on key messages	Mon, September 9	12:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform Board President & VP	Mon, September 9	12:30 PM	Ivan	Phone Call	Finalized
Share Key messages & Comm Plan	Mon, September 9	1:00 PM	Tove	Share with Cabinet & Comms Team	Finalized
Inform School Board	Mon, September 9	1:00 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
Inform Leadership Forum	Mon, September 9	1:15 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
Inform HEA Leadership	Mon, September 9	1:15 PM	Chris L	Phone Call	Finalized
Inform Labor Partners	Mon, September 9	1:15 PM	Chris L	Phone Call	Finalized
Informal All Staff Via Email	Mon, September 9	1:30 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
Wednesday, September 11					
Social Media re: Reopening	Wed, September 11	9:30 AM	Carolina		Finalized
Website news post- FAQ	Wed, September 11	12:20 PM	Carolina		Finalized
FAQ web page	Wed, September 11	12:20 PM	Carolina		Finalized
FAQ page pop	Wed, September 11	12:20 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform Board FAQ	Wed, September 11	12:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform LF FAQ	Wed, September 11	12:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Inform All Staff FAQ	Wed, September 11	12:45 PM	Tove	Email - Outlook	Finalized
	Wed, September 11	12:45 PM	Linda	ParentSquare - Email, Robo, Text	Finalized
Inform All Families FAQ	Wed, September 11	1:00 PM	Linda	ParentSquare - Email, Robo, Text	Finalized
Inform Board: HVA/HVE + Records Retention	Wed, September 11	4:45 PM	Tove		Finalized
Share key messages with central office staff	Wed, September 11	5:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Thursday, September 12					
Updates to LF	Thu, September 12	6:30 PM	Tove		Finalized
Thursday, September 12					
All staff: device usage	Fri, September 13	10:00AM	Tove		Finalized
All staff: Supt Duran Message	Fri, September 13	3:00PM	Tove		Finalized
LF: updates	Fri, September 13	4:45PM	Tove		Finalized
Week of September 16					
School Board: Staff expecations	Mon, September 16	5:00 PM	Tove		Finalized
LF: Staff expecations	Mon, September 16	5:10 PM	Tove		Finalized
LF: Weekly Leadership Brief	Tue, September 17		Tove		Finalized
All Families - Message from Supt Duran	Tue, September 17		Tove		Finalized
All Staff - Device reminder	Tue, September 17	3:40 PM	Tove	Outlook Email	Finalized
	Tue, September 17		Linda	Parentsquare text	Finalized
LF: Short-Term Suspension Instructions	Wed, September 18		Tove		Finalized
Innovation Story - Insider	Fri September 20		Tove		Finalized
Insider FAQs	Fri September 20		Tove		Finalized

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

MESSAGING - URGENT ALERTS

✓ **FAM: School closure 9/11** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Tue, Sep 10, 2024 at 02:45 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	27,273 Emails Delivered	6,446 App Notifications Sent	20,113 Texts Delivered	24,013 Calls Delivered
✓ **STAFF Closure Sept. 11** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Tue, Sep 10, 2024 at 02:31 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	3,555 Emails Delivered	618 App Notifications Sent	3,112 Texts Delivered	3,660 Calls Delivered
✓ **Incident Update - FAM** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Mon, Sep 09, 2024 at 06:56 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	27,269 Emails Delivered	6,439 App Notifications Sent	20,124 Texts Delivered	N/A Calls
✓ **Incident Update** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Mon, Sep 09, 2024 at 06:47 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	N/A Emails	617 App Notifications Sent	3,125 Texts Delivered	N/A Calls
✓ **FAMILY Update September 11** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Wed, Sep 11, 2024 at 01:03 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	27,273 Emails Delivered	6,458 App Notifications Sent	20,193 Texts Delivered	23,915 Calls Delivered
✓ **STAFF Update September 11** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Wed, Sep 11, 2024 at 12:52 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	N/A Emails	621 App Notifications Sent	3,137 Texts Delivered	3,658 Calls Delivered
✓ **Families Reopen** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Tue, Sep 10, 2024 at 06:54 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	27,268 Emails Delivered	6,455 App Notifications Sent	20,17_ Te_ 	
✓ **Staff Reopening** Highline Public Schools Communications • Highline Public Schools **Sent** on Tue, Sep 10, 2024 at 06:52 PM PDT [Urgent Alert]	N/A Emails	618 App Notifications		

EMAIL TO FAMILIES

4:24   LTE 78

‹ 12   ⌃ ⌄

Good afternoon,

All schools are closed on Monday, September 9. All school activities, athletics and meetings are canceled.

We have detected unauthorized activity on our technology systems and have taken immediate action to isolate critical systems. We are working closely with third-party, state and federal partners to safely restore and test our systems.

Here is a link to staff expectations during a school closure.

We understand this comes as an unexpected disruption, particularly on the eve of the first day of kindergarten for many of our families. We recognize the burden this decision places on both families and staff, but student safety is our top priority, and we cannot have school without these critical systems in place.

The investigation is ongoing. We will notify you by 2:00 p.m. on Monday if this disruption impacts schools on Tuesday.

Thank you for your patience and understanding.

[HPS] All schools are closed 9/9/2024. School activities, athletics & meetings are canceled. Central office is open. Unauthorized activity was detected on our tech systems. Student safety is our priority, and we can't operate schools without these systems. Please check your email for more info.

TEXT TO FAMILIES

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

MESSAGING - PERSONAL TOUCH

SEP 9 2024

Hello Kindergarten Families,

Today was supposed to be a special day—one filled with excitement, anticipation, and joy as we welcomed your child to their very first day of school. As a parent myself, I understand this milestone. My oldest son was set to begin kindergarten in Highline today. Like many of you, we were eagerly looking forward to this new chapter.

I recognize that canceling school was a disappointment in more ways than one. Beyond the logistical challenges, we know how much emotional preparation goes into this day. First impressions are important—especially for families experiencing Highline for the first time.

We have a promise in Highline: every student is known by name, strength, and need, and graduates prepared for the future they choose. This promise is at the heart of everything we do.

While today didn't go as planned, our commitment to you and your family remains unwavering. We will always prioritize student safety. But please know we are eager to celebrate your child when they arrive for their first day of school.

Thank you for your patience and understanding as we work to resolve the challenges impacting our technology systems. We look forward to giving your children the warm, welcoming start they deserve as soon as possible.

Living the Promise,

English >

A personal touch matters in times of crisis. Superintendent Ivan Duran, whose own son was starting kindergarten, personally addressed kindergarten families—acknowledging their disappointment and reinforcing our commitment to clear, compassionate communication during the ransomware recovery.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

PROJECT ANALOG
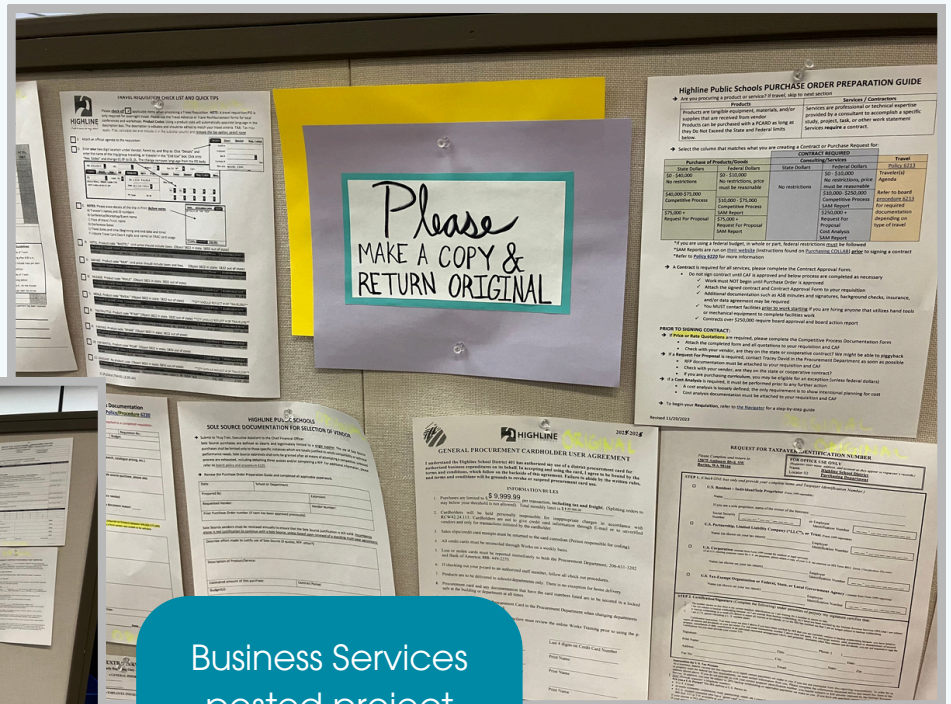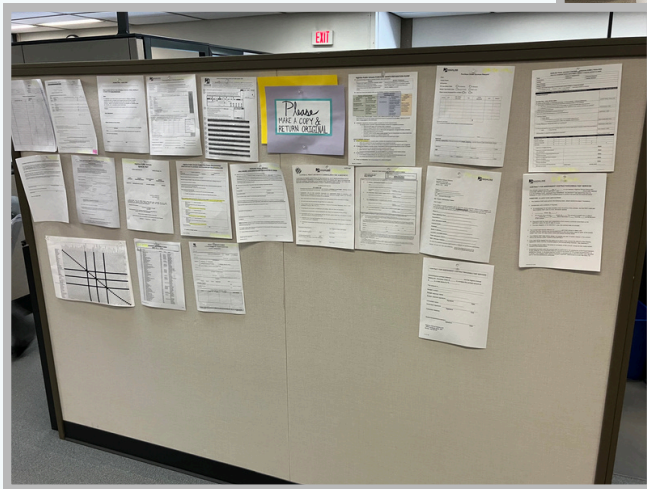
Business Services posted project documents with the direction to take one and make a copy as needed.

EMAIL + PRINT AND POST
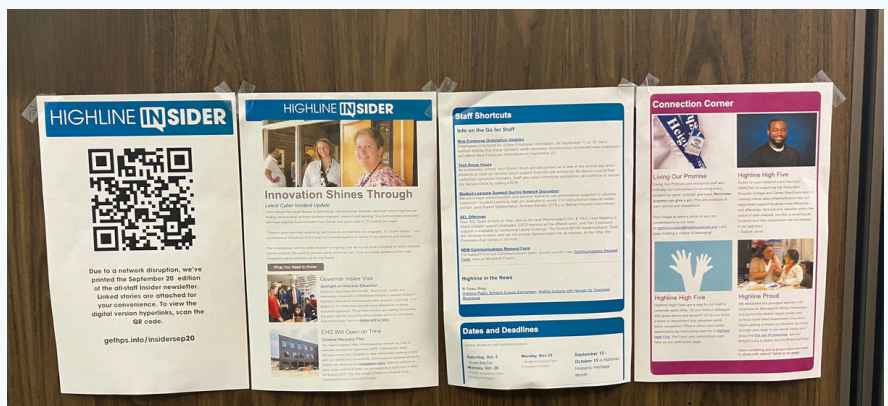
The staff newsletter "Highline Insider" continued to be sent via email, as some staff checked email on district phones or personal devices. To ensure access for all, we also printed and distributed a hard copy of Insider to all worksites and sent a text to staff's personal cell phones to read online.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

COMPUTER REIMAGE AND PASSWORD RESET

HOW TO RESET YOUR PASSWORD WITH
A COMPUTER

Follow these steps to change your password using Microsoft Self-Service Password Reset.
See the back of this document for password requirements and tips.

1 Go to www.office.com and select Sign in.

2 Enter your login name into the sign in bar. This is typically going to be:
FirstName.LastName@highlineschools.org

3 Select Next.

4 The page will redirect to the Highline login page. **Select Forgot my password.**

5 The page will redirect to the **Get back into your account page. Enter the captcha into the entry box.**

6 Select Next.

7 Select your verification method. It is recommended to utilize the **Microsoft Authenticator** app.

8 Select Send Notification
If you do not have any verification modes setup, speak with a technician.
Note: For text message or phone calls, select Text my mobile phone or Call my mobile phone. Follow the on-screen instructions. You will need to use the phone number you entered for MFA. If you don't have access to that device, then contact the Service Desk.

9 A verification code will appear on your screen.

10 Open your Microsoft Authenticator app and **enter the code** found from step 9. **Select Yes.**

11 **Enter and confirm a new password.** See the back for password requirements.

12 Select Finish.

13 *You have successfully completed your password Reset.*

HIGHLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The week of October 14-21, Highline's technology team reimaged 3,500 district-issued devices and supported the password reset process of all staff members. The communications team work closely with the technology team to develop clear and easy-to-understand instructions and communicate expectations to staff prior to the reimage and password reset process.

PASSWORD REQUIREMENTS

All passwords must be at least 12 characters in length and include at least one:
- Uppercase letter
- One lowercase letter
- One number
- One special character (symbol that is not a letter or number)

Note: Passwords should not contain three or more consecutive letters of your name or username.

WHAT TO AVOID WHILE CREATING A STRONG PASSWORD

- Avoid using personal details such as your children's names or birthdays.
- Do not use passwords that you use with other accounts.
- Avoid common words like "Highline" or "Password."

INSTEAD, CONSIDER...

- Use a passphrase, which is a series of two or three random, unrelated words. This can help create a password that is both memorable and secure.

Example: P0pc0rn F!ow3r Such

HIGHLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Strong leadership and collaboration were essential during the ransomware recovery. Cabinet members met regularly to align messaging, coordinate response efforts, and ensure a clear, strategic path forward for staff, students and families.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Transparent, face-to-face communication was key to maintaining trust and ensuring smooth operations during the ransomware recovery. Regular in-person meetings kept staff informed, aligned leadership and reinforced critical next steps in our crisis response.

IN-PERSON MEETINGS & SUPPORT

TRANSITION TO MICROSOFT
STRENGTHENING SECURITY & COLLABORATION

Communication Plan
District Shift to Microsoft

Activity	Date	Who	Notes/URL	Status
Announce				
Gather & review research	Ongoing	DDTS		Ongoing
Draft Key Messages	Thu, November 21	Mandi	Drafts	Finalized
	Fri, November 22	Tove	Reviews	Finalized
	Mon, November 25	DT		Finalized
	Mon, December 2	Mandi	Key Messages Finalized	Finalized
WLB	Thu, January 30	Teshon	FAQs about Transition	Finalized
Update Staff Hub Rotating Banner	Fri, January 10	Carolina	Share direction and opportunities on the rotating banner	Finalized
	Fri, February 7	Nicole	Update, image, language and link	Finalized
WLB	Fri, February 7	Teshon	Transition timeline	alized
Insider	Fri, February 7	Mandi	Microsoft Office 365 Transition Timeline	Finalized
Powerpoint Template	Fri, February 14	Mandi	Powerpoint Template	Finalized
Share Professional Development opportunities Insider	Fri, January 17	Linda	One Note Tips and Tricks in Insider	Finalized
	Thu, February 13	Mandi	Get Ready for Microsoft 365: Training Opportunities Start Soon	Finalized
	Fri, February 21	Mandi	Learn Microsoft 365 Basics	Finalized
	Thu, February 27	Mandi	Learn OneDrive & SharePoint	Finalized
	Fri, March 14	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, March 21	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, March 28	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, April 4	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, April 11	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, April 18	Mandi		Assigned
	Fri, April 25	Mandi		Assigned

In response to the ransomware incident, Highline made the strategic decision to transition to Microsoft Suite and gradually phase out Google use. The transition strengthens our cyber security and consolidates tools. This shift launched a major communications effort to guide staff through the change, ensuring a smooth and informed transition.

Microsoft Transition Key Messages
Announcement

After the cyber incident this fall, improving security is critical. Microsoft offers robust tools and systems designed to protect our data and operations. Highline is moving fully to Microsoft tools, including SharePoint, Teams, and OneDrive. We will begin to phase out Google products like Gmail, Google Drive, and Google Sites. This transition will create a more secure, unified and efficient system for staff.

Our current system operates in both Google and Microsoft environments. This can cause confusion and inefficiencies. The transition to the Microsoft suite will provide consistency across the district and help us work together more effectively. While the timeline is still being finalized, this transition means all staff will eventually use only Microsoft tools.

We understand moving to a new system comes with challenges. To help you adapt, we encourage you to start exploring Microsoft tools now. Some schools and departments are already using these tools effectively. We will share their experiences and strategies to support your transition.

We are also developing professional development opportunities, including training sessions, workshops, and on-demand resources. You can explore current trainings offered on the Digital Transformation Learning Series collab 2.0 webpage.

We will share updates about the timeline, training opportunities, and next steps in the coming weeks and months. Keep an eye on Insider for ongoing updates.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

MEDIA COVERAGE

Proactive media engagement ensured accurate and consistent messaging throughout the crisis. By prioritizing transparency and timely updates, we reinforced trust and minimized misinformation in local news coverage.

GeekWire NEWS ▾ JOBS EVENTS ▾ LISTS ▾ MEMBERS ▾ STUDIOS ▾ ABOUT ▾ Search

Highline Public Schools will reopen classes — without internet — amid cyberattack recovery

BY **TAYLOR SOPER** on September 11, 2024 at 3:09 pm

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Why this ad?

Highline Public Schools, a district south of Seattle, was hit on Sunday by a cyberattack. (GeekWire Photo / Taylor Soper)

Hackers target Seattle-area school district for ransomware attack

Oct. 4, 2024 at 6:00 am

Students hang out near the entrance to Highline High School. Highline Public Schools officials announced this week that hackers targeted the... (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times, 2022) More ⌄

By Dahlia Bazzaz
Seattle Times staff reporter

The cyberthreat that shut down Highline Public Schools in September was a ransomware attack, district officials announced Thursday.

The district is working with the FBI to investigate the attack. Though it's unclear if hackers accessed personal data, the district is offering a year's worth of free credit monitoring service to staff members as a preventive measure, said Tove Tupper, the district's spokesperson.

The district discovered suspicious activity during the first week of classes in September. After a few days of closure, students and staff returned, but they have been barred from using Wi-Fi or district-issued devices as the district tries to eliminate the threat.

Ransomware is software that blocks access to files or entire networks. Hackers will then demand money in exchange for the key.

Highline Public Schools cancel classes again Wednesday due to possible cyberattack

KOMO NEWS abc 4

by KOMO News Staff | Mon, September 9th 2024 at 5:37 AM
Updated Tue, September 10th 2024 at 3:56 PM

Thousands of families in Burien suddenly needed to plan for child care after Highline Public Schools canceled classes due to a possible cyberattack on Sept. 9, 2024. (KOMO News)

LOCAL

Highline Public Schools closed Monday as they deal with a possible cyberattack

By **KIRO 7 News Staff**

September 08, 2024 at 9:34 pm PDT

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

COMMUNITY MAILER

Our mailer celebrated the hard work of staff in getting Highline back online. This reinforced our commitment to transparency, resilience and appreciation for the teamwork that made recovery possible.

HIGHLINE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Becoming Bilingual & Biliterate

HELPING STUDENTS BELONG AND SUCCEED

In Highline's dual language schools, students receive 50% of their instruction in English and 50% in Spanish or Vietnamese.

We have **12** dual language schools!

◀ VIDEO SPOTLIGHT

These programs open doors to culture, careers and connection. Hear parents share why they chose dual language for their children.

▶ gethps.info/dl-stories

We're Back Online, More Resilient Than Ever!

In September, a cyber incident briefly closed schools.

Thanks to our dedicated staff and the tireless work of our technology team, we safely reopened schools and reimaged 4,000 devices.

Most systems are now restored, and updates continue behind the scenes. Thank you, Highline community, for your patience and support!

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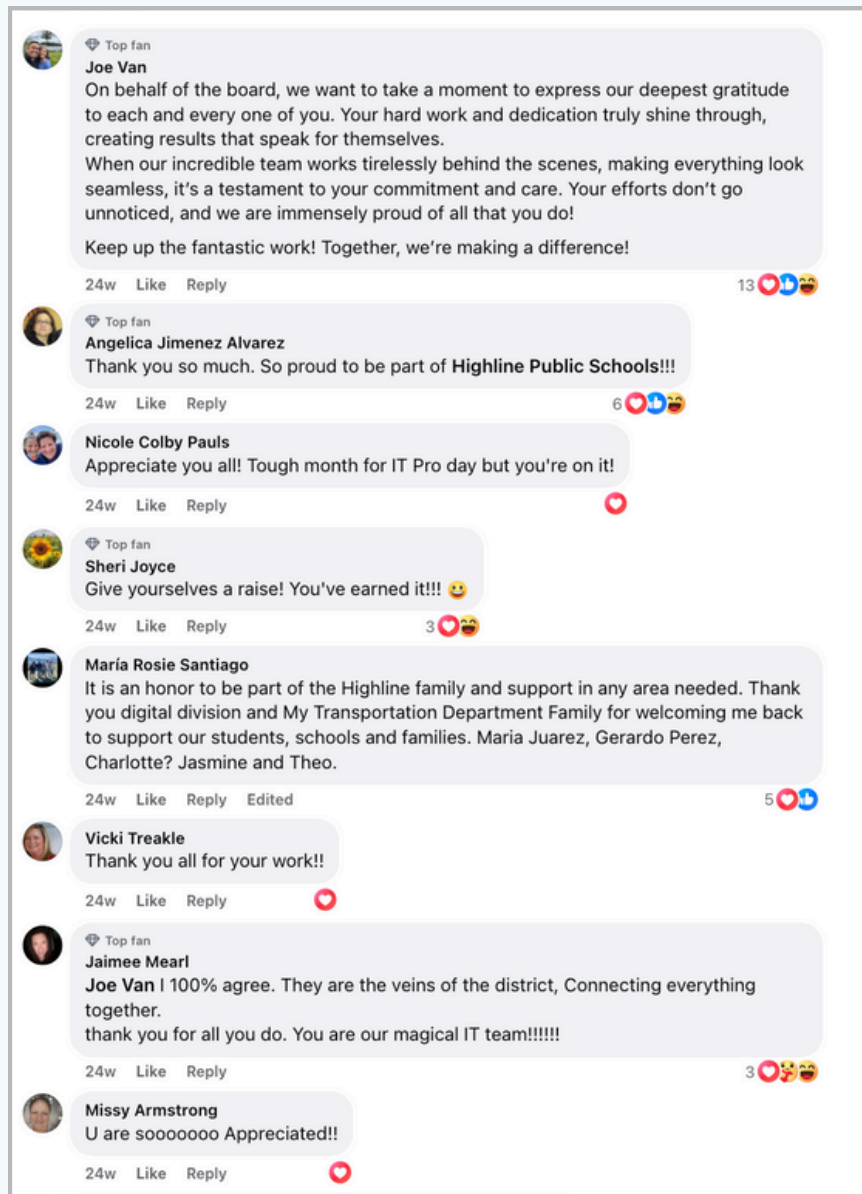
SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS
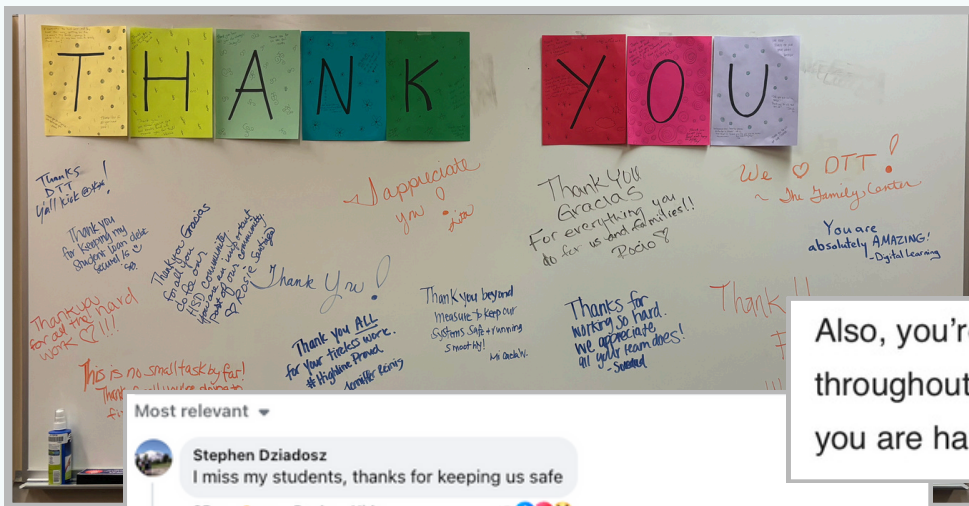
SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Feedback on our response from staff, families and members of the commuinity was overwhelmingly positive and supportive.

Highline Public Schools
Published by Highline Schools
· September 11, 2024 · ⊕

We have taken steps to allow us to restore certain segments of our digital network in a secure manner.

📝 Grades K-12: All schools will be open on Thursday, September 12 for students for grades K-12.

📝 Preschool: The first day of school for preschool students will be Monday, September 16.

A... See more

Thursday, September 12
Schools Re-open for K-12

🔷 **HIGHLINE** PUBLIC SCHOOLS

❤️👍 133   9 comments   50 shares

Highline Public Schools
September 17, 2024 · ⊕

Happy National IT Professional Day to our Highline Digital Transformation Team! 🙌 They've been working tirelessly to help protect our students and district. We appreciate their dedication and hard work to keep us secure!
#HighlineProud
#NationalITProfessionalDay

🏆 Top fan
Joe Van
On behalf of the board, we want to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude to each and every one of you. Your hard work and dedication truly shine through, creating results that speak for themselves.
When our incredible team works tirelessly behind the scenes, making everything look seamless, it's a testament to your commitment and care. Your efforts don't go unnoticed, and we are immensely proud of all that you do!

Keep up the fantastic work! Together, we're making a difference!

24w   Like   Reply   13 ❤️👍😆

🏆 Top fan
Angelica Jimenez Alvarez
Thank you so much. So proud to be part of **Highline Public Schools**!!!

24w   Like   Reply   6 ❤️👍😆

Nicole Colby Pauls
Appreciate you all! Tough month for IT Pro day but you're on it!

24w   Like   Reply   ❤️

🏆 Top fan
Sheri Joyce
Give yourselves a raise! You've earned it!!! 😊

24w   Like   Reply   3 ❤️😆

María Rosie Santiago
It is an honor to be part of the Highline family and support in any area needed. Thank you digital division and My Transportation Department Family for welcoming me back to support our students, schools and families. Maria Juarez, Gerardo Perez, Charlotte? Jasmine and Theo.

24w   Like   Reply   Edited   5 ❤️👍

Vicki Treakle
Thank you all for your work!!

24w   Like   Reply   ❤️

🏆 Top fan
Jaimee Mearl
Joe Van I 100% agree. They are the veins of the district, Connecting everything together.
thank you for all you do. You are our magical IT team!!!!!!

24w   Like   Reply   3 ❤️😍😆

Missy Armstrong
U are sooooooo Appreciated!!

24w   Like   Reply   ❤️

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Feedback on our response from staff, families and members of the commuinity was overwhelmingly positive and supportive.

Also, you're doing a bloody good job throughout this crazy start to a year. Hope you are hanging in there. You're fantastic!

Tove, thank you so much for keeping us updated. I very much appreciate all that you and our district people are doing.

just say that we appreciate you all, your leadership, and your teams. We can only imagine the questions, decisions, and thoughts you all are juggling!

Keep it up, and know that I'm cheering for you and everyone at central office,

HIGHLINE COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Tove Tupper, APR

Chief Communications Officer
Provides strategic communications counsel to the superintendent and cabinet. Responsible for strategies to support strong communication between schools and families, and to foster community support. Leads communications planning, messaging, media relations, and crisis/issues management.

Mandi LeCompte, APR

Director of Communications
Develops and executes district-level communication plans and initiatives that align with strategic plan; manages communications systems and programs; oversees district wide branding representation; supports with media relations and crisis communications.

Carolina Moricet

Communications Manager
Manages and develops social media campaigns; oversees video production; manages website redesign and development; conducts data analytics; develops and manages paid ads; supports execution of communication plans.

Nicole Thompson

Communications Manager
Manages content on district and school websites; leads social media daily planning; supports execution of communication plans; supports ParentSquare Newsletters; point person on school incident messaging.

Rosie Eades

Communications Specialist
Leads bond and school construction communications; coordinates Capital Facilities Advisory Committee; develops content for social media, website, email newsletters; supports execution of communication plans.

Linda Isguerra

Communications Assistant
Manages ParentSquare and Peachjar support for staff; provides Spanish translation and other translation needs; coordinates Weekly Leadership Brief and Office Manager FYI; and provides administrative support to the communications team.