



## 2015 Leadership Through Communication Award Baltimore County Public Schools, Towson, Maryland

### Executive Summary:

Before S. Dallas Dance officially began his tenure (on July 1, 2012) as superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools, he reviewed two years worth of news coverage about the school system and [spent time visiting](#) supermarkets, stores and churches, talking to community members about their thoughts about the schools. At the same time, he formed a prestigious [Transition Team](#), which reviewed school system documents and history and conducted interviews and focus groups. Their resulting [report](#) identified communications as a key to the overall success of BCPS and called for consistency, openness, greater community engagement (particularly through [advisory groups](#)), planning, and a diversity of communications tools and approaches (including expanded use of social media.) Those strategies provided initial direction when Chief Communications Officer Mychael Dickerson joined the team in September 2012.

The two create a formidable team. Well known as an excellent communicator, the superintendent is regarded as a “rock star” among students and is considered relatable, proactive, and energetic, always asking for their opinions on what strategies would work best at the school level. Dr. Dance was named a [ConnectED Educator Champion of Change by the White House](#) and a [Tech-Savvy Superintendent by eSchoolNews](#). The chief communications officer, a former television news reporter and anchor, excels at building relationships, maintaining calm, and managing people and projects.

It is difficult to fully describe the level of collaboration between the superintendent and chief communications officer. Their offices are across the hall from each other, and they communicate with each other throughout every day – in person or via phone calls or text. The chief communications officer sometimes reports that his last conversation at night and first conversation in the morning is with the superintendent. The two meet weekly along with the chief of staff to discuss communications issues and plans, school system initiatives, upcoming events, and more. In addition, the chief communications officer participates in the superintendent’s weekly cabinet meetings and generally accompanies the superintendent for interviews and media events.

One of the first major projects for the Dance administration was the creation of a strategic plan for the school system. Developed in collaboration with the community – through a series of community meetings and workgroups, the plan, [Blueprint 2.0](#), established four pillars for the school system: academics, safety, communications, and organizational development.

To make school system communications more effective, the superintendent reorganized the communications office, under the chief communications officer, into a department – [The Department of Communications and Community Outreach](#)(DCCO). The communications office previously consisted of a television station (BCPS-TV) and communications professionals who handled media relations, social media, publications, special events, and support to the superintendent. Through the reorganization, the offices handling family and community engagement (e.g., parent support, student service learning, volunteer coordination and student councils), copy and print services, community outreach (esp. to community groups and businesses) and legislative relations were incorporated into the new department. In addition, a more formal connection was created between the new department and the web team and Department of Research, Accountability and Assessment. The team lead for web services meets regularly with the chief communications officer and participates in weekly Department of Communications and Community Outreach staff meetings. Also in those meetings is a senior research writer from Research, Accountability and Assessment(DRAA). Her work assignments cross boundaries between departments, and she works out of the communications office twice a week and meets weekly with the chief communications officer and communications officer.

This expanded department works seamlessly to develop and initiate communications projects and events collaboratively from start to finish. The connection to DRAA provides DCCO with easier access to needed data, reports and data analysis.

One of the major new projects this expanded department has undertaken was the creation of a [Parent University](#) (proposed by the superintendent). Since its launch in April 2014, BCPS Parent University has offered a wealth of online resources as well as popular in-person workshops led by BCPS staff and a growing array of community partner organizations including the local community college.

Two-way communication – both in person and using social media – has become a hallmark of the Dance administration. In addition to his regular visits to schools and participation in events, Dr. Dance holds open forum town hall meetings across the county; holds [middle school, high school](#), and [teacher town hall](#) meetings; and is accessible to the entire community via [his Twitter](#) account. In addition, each fall, he invites students and parents to nominate themselves for his [Student Advisory Council](#) and Parent Advisory Council. The selection process for both councils is designed to ensure diversity.

Beyond scheduled opportunities for discussion, the superintendent also makes himself available to meet with constituent groups or their representatives to resolve specific issues. This happened recently regarding the impact of systemwide schedule changes on a particular high school and another community's concerns about renovations to a neighborhood school.

The chief communications officer, working closely with the superintendent, has ensured that this commitment to two-way communications extends throughout the system. In addition to expanding use of existing but underutilized [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts, the

school system launched a news blog, [Deliberate Excellence](#), featuring up-to-date news, pieces by BCPS staff members and students as well as reposted pieces from other blogs.

These two-way communication vehicles support another key strategy of the superintendent and chief communications officer and that is to tell the BCPS story directly to constituents rather than relying heavily on the news media.

To make it easier for stakeholders to access information about the school system, the chief communications officer and superintendent oversaw the redevelopment of the [BCPS website](#), with the focus on making it more user-friendly and making more reports, documents and details easily accessible from the home page. A new “What’s Happening” section enables users to connect to school system reports, opportunities, and updates on construction projects, redistricting and other current issues of interest. Academic and safety sections on the home page also increase access to information by moving the website toward a subject based rather than office based structure. The main section of the website features a rotating series of images linked to news releases, feature stories, video segments and other webpages. This series changes almost daily. The superintendent posts [monthly written messages](#) on the website as well as [video messages](#) to the community at least quarterly.

The website is well trafficked receiving 3.6 million visits and experiencing 38.4 million page views per year. At the superintendent’s specific request, the redesign included the addition of pages (accessible from the home page) to pages in Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Urdu and Russian that describe services available to speakers of other languages and include links to translated forms and publications. Previously this information was available on the website but was scattered throughout and difficult for a non-English speaker to find.

Other new communication tools include an [e-newsletter](#) that reaches 20,000 individuals each week and is available for subscription and a [BCPS Now mobile app](#), which alerts subscribers to important information including closings and delays as well as any important news from around the district.

The superintendent and chief communications officer realize that successful communications for the department requires the involvement of individuals beyond DCCO staff. Under the Dance administration, the existing Good News Ambassador program has grown in depth and effectiveness. Good News Ambassadors are staff members (usually teachers or administrators) at each school who volunteer to share good news story ideas and photos with DCCO staff and disseminate school-based and systemwide stories throughout their school communities. This initiative has greatly increased the flow, quality and timeliness of story ideas that the DCCO team receives. Changes to the program have included an annual training in photography and journalistic writing. This school year, the program will expand to include student GNAs as well as GNAs from key BCPS departments.

Principals are the chief communicators for their schools, and DCCO provides support to them in a variety of ways. A principals’ toolkit, accessible from the BCPS intranet, is filled

with resources developed by DCCO including sample letters home to parents regarding various issues. In addition, the chief communications officer and DCCO staff provide annual basic communications training to principals and their administrative assistants.

Events have become another way that communications raises the visibility of the school system. At the request of the superintendent, recognition activities have expanded. Unlike the past, every school now selects a [teacher of the year](#) and the systemwide teacher of the year ceremony has become a major event. A new [principal of the year program](#) and [volunteer of the year program](#) were also initiated. During the 2013-2014 school year, the first BCPS volunteer of the year was announced at a gala breakfast ceremony.

The first ever [BCPS State of the Schools](#) event was held in 2013. The 2014 ceremony welcomed more than 1,000 participants including business and community leaders. In 2014, an inaugural edition of a State of the Schools report was presented to the community.

Included in this report were some of the results from the [2014 Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey](#). While BCPS has previously conducted annual surveys, in past years an average of only 500 stakeholders would complete it. This year, Dr. Dance's and the Department of Communications and Community Outreach's efforts got those numbers up to more than 40,000. Those efforts included a social media surge from the BCPS Twitter and Facebook accounts, and Dr. Dance's and Mr. Dickerson's Twitter accounts, principals' toolkit, delivered electronically, which included scripted messages for Blackboard Connect phone calls, blurbs for newsletters and websites, and talking points for meetings with staff and parents. The superintendent also asked principals to be sure that class time was available for students to take the survey and that they make computers available in their buildings for staff (including bus drivers and cafeteria workers) and parents and community members to take the survey.

The DCCO has also played a major role over the last year with the launch of one of the superintendent's largest initiatives – the school system's move to a 1:1 digital learning environment where personalized, student-centered and critical thinking are emphasized. The department has been integrally involved in this initiative since it was first announced at the State of the Schools 2013. Communications – including video stories, web pages, feature stories, blog posts, newspaper commentary and media outreach – have emphasized the need for the shift and the process for making changes. DCCO pulled together a group of students to come up with a name for the initiative – S.T.A.T., Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow, and highlighted the selection of the 10 schools where S.T.A.T. is starting this school year. To help the community understand the initial impact of S.T.A.T., DCCO is working with technology and curriculum and instruction staff to develop monthly profiles of S.T.A.T. “lighthouse” schools and a blog series that will follow students, parents, teachers and administrators onto their journey into 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

The department also embarked on a marketing initiative “We Are Team BCPS,” which included a very successful [“Team BCPS Day”](#) in January 2014. The campaign included news releases, signage on buildings, public service announcements and videos. On the evenings surrounding this day, to express unity and pride in the school system, both the county

government and school system headquarters were bathed in blue light. On the day itself, the community was asked to wear “BCPS blue” and to send us pictures. We were overwhelmed with the response. Hundreds of pictures came in via Twitter, Facebook and email, and we posted the best of them to our [Flickr account](#). Participation came not only from schools and offices, but also business and community partners.

Because, in Baltimore County, 60 percent of households do not have children in our schools, we began this school year with a focus on them. Our [“Back to School Involves You, Too!”](#) campaign uses all of our communications tools to remind community members about the various ways our schools benefit them (e.g., property values and green spaces). Special events incorporated in this campaign include a [breakfast for 140 neighborhood association leaders](#) with the superintendent; a public showing of the documentary “Cyber-Seniors” (in collaboration with AARP) at one of our high schools; a series of Parent University workshops for grandparents raising their grandchildren; and participation in the county’s Baby Boomer/Senior Expo.

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