



Arlington Public Schools
2010 Gold Medallion Award Entry
"Snow Communications"

Submitted by

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Snow Communications – Summary

Analysis

From December 2009 through President's Day 2010, the Washington metropolitan region and the regional school districts, including Arlington Public Schools, suffered unprecedented and record-breaking snowfall. One storm with over a foot of snow is news and can be fun for those who love cold weather. Three consecutive storms were crippling and presented daunting challenges. While this presented great fun for students, the fallout presented multiple challenges for parents and educators:

- Closed schools meant that instructional programs and student learning were all on hold.
- Local libraries and other community learning centers were also closed and crippled transportation limited opportunities for student learning through other resources
- Closed schools presented long-term childcare challenges for families when parents returned to work
- Extended school closings meant that the district's existing makeup day plan would not be sufficient. Since many families had already booked travel plans for scheduled vacations, parents worried about the possible loss of spring break, Memorial Day and/or an extended school year through June 30. (Virginia law requires that districts must utilize all existing days or time to fulfill the 180 day or 990 instructional hour requirement before waivers may be considered).

Facing an extended loss of instructional time, Arlington Superintendent Dr. Pat Murphy challenged his Senior Staff to identify ways to support families while schools were closed. The goals for staff initiatives included:

- Maintaining strong relationships with families during this period of "separation" from schools,
- Building confidence among parents to assure them that APS was being proactive to return schools to normal operations as soon as possible,
- To support parents struggling with handling the increased time with students in a constructive way, and
- To reinforce our primary goal to provide sound education experiences for students in and out of the classroom.

Planning

In response to this challenge, the School and Community Relations Department proposed a three-fold communications approach. The proposal included:

- Establishing regular communications updates for parents.
 - Writing and distributing daily "Snow Updates" from the Superintendent to all parents via APS School Talk.
 - Producing two segments of APS Snapshots," a weekly cable TV program hosted by the Superintendent to communicate with families. The first segment reviewed how decisions about closing school are made, and the second segment focused on snow communications and preparations to re-open schools after President's Day.
- Creation of a "Snow Learning" Web page including a Web-based opportunity for families to interact with APS and other parents.
- Establishing APS as a reliable communication channel for information to families to instill confidence in the district leadership and decisions.

Communication/Implementation

The snow communications efforts benefitted greatly from the recent electronic and internet communications tools now available to communications professionals. Although the communications team and Superintendent were snowed in like everyone in the region for more than a week, work continued and communications messages were written, posted and delivered electronically. School and Community Relations staff and APS leadership "met" several times a day via conference calling, and work continued, apparently seamlessly, to meet the needs of our constituents and provide ongoing communications.

E-Communications:

- The APS Home page was updated daily with information on our status of operations. In addition, APS School Talk messages and text messages announced our status. Information was also provided to

- local media, and updates were available on the APS Hotline in English and Spanish.
- Seven “daily updates” from the Superintendent were written and distributed via APS School Talk to 23,000 subscribers.
- The Snow Learning page, including a “Feedback link” were created to offer parents suggestions of “at home” learning activities, Web sites, and other alternative learning options. During the week, Parent Responses were posted online and referenced in the daily updates to allow parents to “talk” and share with each other.
- Two “APS Snapshots” segments allowed families to “see” the work of the APS crews and staff

As staff prepared to re-open schools, partially blocked roads and sidewalks continued to present concerns about student safety for parents and school leaders. The “daily updates” encouraged parents to help open sidewalks and bus stops. In addition, before schools re-opened, on Sunday and Monday of President’s Day weekend, APS bus drivers spent the days “practicing” their routes to identify trouble spots. Several communication activities were related to this initiative:

- Local media were invited to ride along on the test runs and covered the preparation activities.
- APS officials sent a final update on Mon, Feb. 15 with suggestions of ways to help and some cautions of “what to expect” for transportation and traffic.
- A list of “alternative bus routes” was communicated with families and posted to the APS Web site.
- A Robo-dialer voice mail message was recorded and “broadcast” to parents’ home telephone numbers in English and Spanish, outlining these suggestions and information for parents.
- In preparation for difficult streets, APS prepared large signs for buses to display in their windows that read, “Patience Please: I Cannot Back Up” as a measure to limit frustrations with drivers in oncoming cars. Bus drivers reported that these signs were very helpful in avoiding confrontations with drivers of other vehicles and building an understanding among motorists about the challenges for buses.

Communications with APS staff during the interruption of operations included regular messages to employees’ through their voicemail accounts that could be accessed from home. In addition, a summary story appeared in *NewsCheck*, the district’s staff newsletter, highlighting efforts by staff during the blizzards. A similar story appeared in the March issue of the countywide newsletter, *The Citizen*. Finally, communications regarding the Makeup Day Plans were publicized to all APS School Talk subscribers, local media and posted to the Web.

Evaluation/Results

Our “Snow Communications” project, including the “Snow Learning” page, daily updates, and TV programming, was a monumental success and will be a pattern for future crises or other disruptions of school operations. Although no one would have opted for such an extended disruption of schools, parent reaction was extremely positive, and the number and quantity of critical comments was greatly reduced from previous years.

The Snow Learning Page had more than 7,500 visitors to the page. The site averaged approximately 1,300 visits daily, with the majority occurring within 90 minutes of the “daily update” being sent to subscribers. In addition, the Instructional Technology supervisor reported that one evening, over 950 users logged into Blackboard in the first three hours after daily update was sent which included a reminder to families about the Blackboard resources being posted by individual teachers.

Parents continue to thank the Superintendent for his communication efforts during that time to keep families informed and involved during this major disruption of our instructional program. The strong communications effort clearly demonstrated our commitment for maintaining a strong and effective partnership with parents.

Attached are two files which summarize the 171 messages received (and answered) over the two weeks during the snow disruptions. In total, 64 “replies” were received from School Talk messages and 107 messages were received through the “Contact Us” link on the Web or direct emails to the Superintendent, School Board or Senior Staff. Overall, only 12% were negative and only 4% were complaints. We received numerous suggestions and questions, and responded accordingly to all. The overwhelming majority of the comments received were positive.



**Arlington
Public
Schools**

DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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April 9, 2010

Dear NSPRA Judges:

I am pleased to present an entry for your consideration for the 2010 Gold Medallion Awards.

From December 2009 through President's Day 2010, the Washington metropolitan region and the regional school districts, including Arlington Public Schools, suffered unprecedented and record-breaking snowfall. One storm with over a foot of snow is news and can be fun for those who love cold weather. Three consecutive storms were crippling and presented daunting challenges.

Throughout the region the federal government, businesses, public transportation and airports, and of course, public and private schools were closed for days on end. While this presented great fun for students, the fallout presented multiple challenges for parents and educators:

- Closed schools meant that instructional programs and student learning were all on hold.
- Local libraries and other community learning centers were also closed and crippled transportation limited opportunities for student learning through other resources
- Closed schools presented long-term childcare challenges for families when parents returned to work
- Extended school closings meant that the district's existing makeup day plan would not be sufficient. Since many families had already booked travel plans for scheduled vacations, parents worried about the possible loss of spring break, Memorial Day and/or an extended school year through June 30. (Virginia law requires that districts must utilize all existing days or time to fulfill the 180 day or 990 instructional hour requirement before waivers may be considered).

Facing an extended loss of instructional time, Arlington Superintendent Dr. Pat Murphy challenged his Senior Staff to identify ways to support families while school was out. In response to this challenge, the School and Community Relations Department proposed a three-fold communications approach. Our proposal included:

- Writing and distributing daily "Snow Updates" from the Superintendent to all parents via APS School Talk,
- Creation of a "Snow Learning" Web page, and
- Establishing APS as a communication channel among families to facilitate sharing of home learning activities and ideas among families.

In addition, we proposed using the existing "APS Snapshots" – a weekly cable TV program hosted by the Superintendent to communicate with families. Two segments were released during the storms: the first outlined how decisions about closing school are made (with our transportation staff) and the second focused on preparations to re-open schools.

Our "Snow Communications" project, including the "Snow Learning" page, daily updates, and TV programming, was a monumental success and will be a pattern for future crises or other disruptions of school operations. Although no one would have opted for such an extended disruption of schools, parent reaction was extremely positive, and the number and quantity of critical comments was greatly reduced from previous years. Parents continue to thank the Superintendent for his communication efforts during that time to keep families informed and involved during this major disruption of our instructional program. The strong communications effort clearly demonstrated our commitment for maintaining a strong and effective partnership with parents.

We appreciate the opportunity from NSPRA to showcase this successful communications initiative.

Sincerely,

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