

# **Communications Needs of School Superintendents; Related Perceptions of School-Communications Staff**

## **Introduction and Advice from NSPRA Executive Director Rich Bagin, APR**

Kudos to our NSPRA CAP Committee Members and 2005-2006 President Gay Campbell, APR, for completion of their work dealing with the perceptions of the role of the school communication professional in local school districts.

The results can serve as a catalyst as they indicate great talking points for NSPRA members and their superintendents and board members on just what their role should be in their districts. The list of attributes and skills is a great starting point for members to self-assess where they stand now and where they hope to be in their school systems. It takes at least “two to tango” to move up on this attribute/skill ladder so we urge you to get aggressive with real-life local examples of how you can be more valuable for your district.

NSPRA goal is to make more superintendents and board members aware of just what the communication function can do for their school districts when practiced at the management, professional and leadership levels taught by NSPRA.

A bit of advice, however, for members is to not bite off more than you can chew. If you are not yet ready to be an authoritative comprehensive communication professional giving strategic advice to your superintendent and Board, then learn from NSPRA and veteran colleagues on how to become one. Keep growing, learning and using your determination to earn your “counselor stripes” for your leadership team.

And finally, NSPRA committees are working on additional research in this area. When additional research is completed, NSPRA will add to these results. Perhaps at this point, it may be best to say if you had 13 leading school superintendents in a room and asked them about their expectations of the communications professional, wouldn't you want to know what they had to say? That's what this research gives us now along with the perceptions of 35 communication professionals.

It is pointing us in the right direction. Take advantage of these findings and get aggressive in defining your role in your school district.

Rich Bagin, APR  
NSPRA Executive Director

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**Project team members:**

Co-Chairs:

Ellen Boyd, APR

Athena Vadnais

Committee members:

Allison Westfall

Georgia Dunn

**Purpose:**

This project sought to investigate the qualities superintendents most need and want in their communications staff. The project also sought to investigate the perceptions held by school communications staff about the qualities they thought were most important for the success of the schools and school districts they serve.

A questionnaire was designed in the fall and winter of 2005-06 and then it was executed online in March 2006 with additional completion of the questionnaire completed in July 2006.

A panel of 35 school public relations practitioners and 13 superintendents completed the questionnaire. The experience levels of the superintendents ranged from 0 to more than 20 years. The experience level of the school communications practitioners ranged from 6 years to more than 20 years. The size of school districts ranged from fewer than 5,000 students to more than 50,000 students.

**Background:**

To compile a list of skills or attributes to be studied, team members reviewed national communication materials and university requirements for advanced degrees in communications. They also conducted interviews with communication professionals. The resulting list of 31 skills or attributes became the basis of a web-based survey and subsequent paper surveys.

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Attributes or skills which were rated by participants were:

- Ability to mitigate a crisis and perform well under pressure
- Ability to communicate a positive image for the school district
- Excellent critical thinking skills
- Ability to relay information clearly to a variety of audiences
- Excellent media relations skills
- Knowledge and skill in building relationships with strategic publics
- Willingness to communicate honestly and fully-even if the information is not flattering to the school district
- Ability to develop strategic messages and deliver them effectively
- Excellent writing skills
- Excellent public speaking skills
- Ability to communicate issues so community wants to solve problems, not blame schools
- Well-organized
- Ability to identify and target strategic publics (stakeholders)
- Ability to seek long-term benefits rather than short-term gains
- Knowledge of issues related to public education
- Ability to take leadership role within school district
- Ability to offer strategic counsel to school leaders
- Effective marketing skills
- Ability to train school staff to be effective communicators
- Knowledge/training in strategic communications management
- Ability to meet deadlines
- Excellent computer skills, including internet capabilities
- Effective strategic planning skills
- Ability to get positive stories in the media
- Ability to hold school district leaders accountable (asking the tough questions before reporters do)
- Knowledge and experience in implementing PR research methods
- Detail-oriented
- Ability to influence change in both school leaders and community
- Knowledge of the political process and ability to influence change in both school leaders and community
- Knowledge of the political process and ability to influence legislators to support public education
- Accreditation in public relations

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**Key Observations:**

The top skills desired by superintendents were (*note tied scores for numbers 1 and 3*): (average score on a scale of 1-10)

1. Ability to mitigate a crisis and perform well under pressure: 8.769
1. Ability to relay information clearly to a variety of audiences: 8.769
1. Ability to communicate a positive image for the school district: 8.769
2. Willingness to communicate honestly and fully—even if the information is not flattering to the school district: 8.6923
3. Knowledge and skills in building relationships with strategic publics: 8.6923
3. Excellent critical thinking skills: 8.667
4. Ability to develop strategic messages and deliver them effectively: 8.6154

The communications skills most valued by the communications professionals who completed the survey were: (average score on a scale of 1-10)

1. Willingness to communicate honestly and fully even if the information is not flattering to the school district: 9.411
2. Ability to offer strategic counsel to school leaders: 8.972
3. Ability to assess and address issues before they become crises: 8.837
4. Ability to develop strategic messages and deliver them effectively: 8.702
5. Ability to mitigate a crisis and perform well under pressure: 8.621

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Table 1

**PR Qualities Most Important to Superintendents and School Communicators**  
**Priority Order Assigned to Communications Skills**

<b>Superintendents</b>			<b>Communications Staff members</b>	
<b>Expertise/skill</b>	<b>Average score</b>		<b>Expertise/Skill</b>	<b>Average Score</b>
1.Ability to mitigate a crisis and perform well under pressure	8.7692		1.Willingness to communicate honestly and fully even if the information is not flattering to the school district	9.411 Supt. #3
1.Ability to relay information clearly to a variety of audiences	8.7692		2.Ability to offer strategic counsel to school leaders	8.9722 Supt. #10
2.Ability to communicate a positive image for the school district	8.769		3.Ability to assess and address issues before they become crises	8.837 Supt #8
3.Willingness to communicate honestly and fully—even if the information is not flattering to the school district	8.6923		4.Ability to develop strategic messages and deliver them effectively	8.702 Supt #5
3.Knowledge and skills in building relationships with strategic publics	8.6923		5.Ability to mitigate a crisis and perform well under pressure	8.621 Supt.#1
4.Excellent critical thinking skills	8.667		5.Ability to relay information clearly to a variety of audiences	8.621 Supt # 1
5.Ability to develop strategic messages and deliver them effectively	8.6154		6.Knowledge and skill in building relationships with strategic publics	8.567 Supt #3
6.Excellent writing skills	8.3077		7.Excellent critical thinking skills	8.459 Supt. #10
7. Knowledge of issues	8.2308		8.Ability to communicate	8.270

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related to public information			issues so community wants to solve problems, not blame schools	Supt #10
8.Ability to assess and address issues before them become a crises	8.222		9.Ability to take leadership role within the district	8.234 Supt. #16
9.Excellent media relations skills	8.0769		10.Ability to identify and target strategic publics	8.228 Supt #9
9.Ability to identify and target strategic publics (stakeholders)	8.0769		11.Effective strategic planning skills	8.081 Supt. 13
<b><u>Superintendents</u></b> <b>Expertise/skill</b>	<b>Average score</b>		<b><u>Communications staff</u></b> <b>Expertise/Skill</b>	<b>Average Score</b>
10.Ability to offer strategic counsel to school leaders	7.9231		12.Ability to hold school district leaders accountable (asking the hard questions before reporters do)	8.054 Supt #18
10.Ability to seek long-term benefits rather than short-term gains	7.9231		12.Ability to seek long-term benefits rather than short-term gains	8.054 Supt. #10
10.Ability to communicate issues so community wants to solve problems , not blame schools	7.9231		13.Knowledge and training in strategic communications management	8.027 Supt #12
11.Well organized	7.8462		14.Excellent writing skills	7.945 Supts. #6
11.Effective marketing skills	7.8462		15.Ability to communicate a positive image for the school district	7.918 Supt #2
12.Knowledge and training in strategic communications management	7.7692		16.Knowledge of issues related to public education	7.891 Supt #7
13.Ability to train school staff to be effective communicators	7.6154		17.Able to meet deadlines	7.864 Supt #15

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13.Effective strategic planning skills	7.6154		18.Ability to influence change in both school leaders and community	7.837 Supt. #20
13.Excellent public speaking skills	7.6154		19.Excellent media relations skills	7.756 Supt #9
14.Excellent computer skills including internet capabilities	7.5		20.Knowledge and experience in implementing PR research methods	7.621 Supt #18
15.Able to meet deadlines	7.4615		21.Ability to train staff in effective communications	7.540 Supt #13
16.Ability to take leadership role within school district	7.3077		21.Well organized	7.540 Supt #11
17.Ability to get positive stories in the media	7.1538		22.Excellent public speaking skills	7.194 Supt #13
18.Experience and knowledge in implementing PR research methods	7.0769		23.Detail Oriented	6.783 Supt #19
<b><u>Superintendents</u></b> <b><u>Expertise/skill</u></b>	<b>Average score</b>		<b><u>Communications staff</u></b> <b><u>Expertise/Skill</u></b>	<b>Average Score</b>
18.Ability to hold school district leaders accountable (asking the tough questions before reporters do)	7.0769		24.Knowledge of the political process and ability to influence legislators to support public education	6.729 Supt #21
19.Detail oriented	6.8462		25.Effective marketing skills	6.513 Supt #11
20.Ability to influence change in both school leaders and the community	6.6154		25.Able to get positive stories in the media	6.513 Supt #14
21.Knowledge of the political process and ability to influence	6.3077		26.Excellent computer skills, including internet capabilities	6.459 Supt #14

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legislators to support public education				
22.Accreditation in public relations	4.769		27.Accreditation in public relations	5.189 Supt: Last

**Recommendations:**

- Further engagement of additional superintendents and school communication professionals will add a stronger value to this study. Further work is planned by CAP committee professionals.
- Superintendents and their school communication professionals need to discuss the list of attributes/skills and set priorities for the communication function in their districts.
- Superintendents and their school communication professionals also need to look at professional development opportunities in strengthening the priority attributes/skills for both the superintendent and communication professional.
- Through this data, NSPRA needs to make more superintendents and board members aware of the expectations of a comprehensive communication program for a local school district.

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