About This Survey on Fake News

With all that we are experiencing during the COVID-19 crisis, this survey report on fake news may seem trivial and a far cry from today’s multiple breaking news stories.

But even now, we see stories based on anecdotal evidence capturing headlines and enabling social media chatter that leads to some believing what turns out to be fake news—like the latest “cure” to COVID-19.

NSPRA members know best how fake news influences their communities. It may or may not be a problem for your school district now, but we have seen school finance elections go down the tubes and new curriculum programs eliminated because of rumors started through fake news narratives ignited through social media.

In communities where ongoing two-way communication programs exist, school districts normally have earned enough trust and integrity through their transparency and consistency to ride out a wave of fake news. Parents and others know where to go for straight, factual answers. They also spread the truth among their peers and others in their communities.

And that is just another reason why the strategic school communication function needs to be one of the foundational pillars of the management team for all school districts.

Rich Bagin, APR
NSPRA Executive Director
Introduction

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) administered a survey on fake news in K-12 public education and its impact on school communications to all 1,875 association members across the United States and Canada from Jan. 23 - Feb. 5, 2020. The following report outlines how respondents define fake news, their strategies to counter it and the safeguards that communications offices have in place to ensure they are providing accurate news and information.

A total of 185 people responded to this survey, which represents 10% of NSPRA’s membership. Association members are primarily those tasked with running the communication programs of school systems, including communication directors, communication/public information specialists, technical specialists, superintendents and building-level leaders. The majority of the respondents were from NSPRA’s South Central Region (41 respondents), followed by 39 respondents from the Mideast Region and 33 respondents from the North Central Region.

More than 80% of survey respondents consider fake news an issue for K-12 public school systems today.

Given that finding, all NSPRA members are encouraged to share and discuss this data with their communication teams, superintendents, principals and other school system leaders. Compare these national survey findings with your own formal or informal research on local issues related to fake news. Then begin to plan for how you will combat fake news in the future to prevent challenges to normal school system operations.
Defining Fake News

News media, politicians, pundits and the public all have their own perspectives on what constitutes “fake news.” When school communicators were asked in this survey how they would define it, the majority of respondents identified fake news as:

- False stories shared via print/broadcast media or online sources – blogs, social media, websites, etc. – that appear to be news and that are intended to mislead the reader/viewer. (80.54% of respondents)
- False information deliberately spread, in any manner, to influence public opinion or obscure the truth. (78.92% of respondents)

For public schools, fake news topics largely center around issues related to school safety, leadership, employees, finances and discipline. Each of these areas is critical to daily operations for a school system.

- In districts with 25,000 – 75,000 students, nearly half of respondents said district/school administrators were the topic for fake news about their district.
- More than a third of school districts with 10,000 – 75,000 students said school safety was a fake news topic they experienced. A quarter of school districts with 5,000 – 9,999 students said they were the subject of fake news about school safety as well.
- More than a quarter of school districts with 5,000 – 24,999 students identified school discipline as a fake news topic they experienced.

Top Fake News Topics

- School Safety (29.19%)
- School Employees/Personnel Matters (23.78%)
- School/District Administrators (23.24%)
- General Operating Budget/Finances (21.08%)
- School Discipline (20%)
Countering the Fake News Challenge

More than half of the respondents (57.84%) indicated that their general practice is to **challenge fake news** reported about their school systems. They use strategies and tactics such as the following to counter fake news:

- Post accurate information and statements on official social media channels and the district/school website.
- Include a Fact Checker section on the district and school website.
- Contact the news source or reporter directly to correct misinformation. For these discussions, have the accurate data and information on hand.
- Have transparent communication with students’ families through channels such as emails and school meetings.
- Superintendent provides a statement or participates in a press interview.

Communications offices also have in place their own **safeguards** to ensure school systems provide accurate news and information. Survey respondents provided the following examples:

- Have consistent policies and procedures in place to have multiple departments and personnel within the district to vet messaging before it’s published.
- Point the community to one location such as an email address to take feedback.
- Use trusted data sources and primary sources.
- Use media monitoring tools such as Google Alerts.
- Check, check and re-check all information prior to posting.
- Verify information on multiple levels within the school/district for what’s written in media releases and in their messaging.

Some school systems have taken the additional step of providing **curriculum and/or professional development** on topics such as digital literacy that can help counter fake news.

- Less than half of the survey respondents (41.08%) indicated their school systems offer instruction/curriculum on how to discern fake news.
- Among those who offer such instruction/curriculum, a quarter do so in middle schools (25.95%) and over a third do so in high schools (37.84%).
- In school districts with less than 2,000 students, more than half of the respondents (53.85%) indicated they offer students instruction/curriculum on how to discern fake news.
- This curriculum/instruction is communicated through parent information sessions on news discernment and digital citizenship, stories in their district/school newsletters, and social media to provide updates on curriculum/instruction changes.
Monitoring the News

Staying on top of daily news about a school system – real or “fake” – is typically the task of a communications office. Respondents were asked about how frequently they monitor news sources for information related to their school district and/or K-12 public education. Some trends that emerged include that:

- Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74.81%) with five or more years of experience monitor network TV news daily.
- More than half of respondents (53.37%) with 10 or fewer years of experience monitor social media daily, in comparison to just 43% of respondents with 11 or more years of experience.
- In districts with 5,000-24,999 students, more than half of the respondents (52.25%) monitor local newspapers daily.
- In districts with 2,000-4,999 students, more than a third of respondents (39.29%) monitor local newspapers on a weekly basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Sources Monitored on a Daily Basis</th>
<th>Sources Never Monitored by Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media (96%)</td>
<td>National Podcasts (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Newspapers (84%)</td>
<td>Local Podcasts (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network TV News (73%)</td>
<td>National Blogs (56%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Survey Participants

A total of 185 people responded to NSPRA’s fake news survey, which was administered to 1,875 association members. Some trends that emerged include that:

- Nearly half of the respondents work in one-person communications offices.
- More than half have worked in communications for five years or more.
- More than 70% work in school systems serving between 2,000 and 24,999 students.

The following charts provide more details on the survey participants.
## Survey Participants by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Central Region (AR, KS, LA, Mo, OK, TX)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mideast Region (D.C., IN, KY, MD, MI, OH, VA, WV)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central Region (IL, IA, MN, NE, ND, SD, WI, Manitoba, Northwestern ON)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Region (CT, DE, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Eastern ON, Prince Edward Island, Quebec)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Region (AL, FL, GA, MS, NC, SC, TN, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Region (AZ, CA, CO, HI, NV, NM, UT, WY)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Region (AK, ID, MT, OR, WA, Alberta, BC, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Yukon)</td>
<td>11</td>
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### NSPRA Staff Contact

Contact Rebecca Shaw, NSPRA communication manager, with any questions about this Fake News Survey report at rshaw@nspra.org or at 301-519-1221.