

March 11, 2011

TO: Mr. Anthony Tata, Superintendent, Wake County Public School System

FROM: Terry Abbott, Chairman, Drive West Communications

RE: **Review of Wake County Public School System Communications**

Background, methodology and acknowledgements

Drive West Communications was contacted on January 19, 2011 and asked to work with new Wake County Public School System Superintendent Anthony Tata to plan a communications audit for the school district. On the same day, I contacted Mr. Tata to begin the planning process for my visit to Wake County and the development of the communications audit report. I spoke with Mr. Tata by phone on January 24 to continue working on the planning for the review. We agreed I would come to Raleigh to conduct the on-site interviews and review of communications material on February 10 and 11.

On February 10 and 11, 2011, working at the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) offices, Drive West Communications conducted a series of half-hour and one-hour interviews with a total of 47 school district officials, board members, principals, teachers and parents. These interviews yielded a significant amount of information about the communications structures, procedures and performance at the school district. The information from those interviews, along with a review of material online at the district's website and a review of documents provided by the district, formed the foundation for this report.

Mr. Tata, Chief of Staff Terri Cobb, Chief Communications Officer Michael Evans and the leadership team, board members, staff and parents were very gracious with their time and attention. The team was willing and eager to provide details about the communications functions, capabilities and history



of the district and to make recommendations. Their support for this communications review was vital and is gratefully acknowledged.

Findings

STRENGTHS

The arrival of the new superintendent has generated hope and excitement among staff members. At the time of my visit, the superintendent had visited 17 schools in two weeks and met with numerous community organizations. Parents, staff and board members interviewed for this report were positive in their comments about the arrival of the new superintendent and his early activities.

The new superintendent has an excellent working understanding of the nuances of good communications and great experience in successful communications. Wake County has an experienced public relations professional at the helm of its communications operation. Chief Communications Officer Michael Evans joined the district in 2002 with an extensive body of work in media relations in the private sector and with experience at public relations and advertising agencies. Evans is well respected in the organization, and his work is widely praised by other leaders at the school district. Wake County Public Schools has one of the best resourced communications departments I have reviewed in the country.

"They are trying to get out news and be on the top of issues. Michael is real skilled at crafting messages. The departments and the schools rely on the (Communications) Department for advice and help. They support central services, but they also support the schools," a district executive said.

Another district executive said, "Michael has a very good relationship with the media. I think he's good in what he does. He softens the blows as much as possible. His department has done the best job since I've been here."

Unlike many school districts across the country, this year, Wake County began working regularly to "harvest" emails of parents, especially those of middle and high school students, to help the district regularly provide electronic communication. The district also regularly uses the social networking tools Twitter and YouTube to promote information to the public,

putting Wake County ahead of many school districts in the move toward taking advantage of social networking opportunities. District videos on YouTube were viewed more than 23,000 times in 2010, and the district had nearly 1,500 regular followers of its Twitter postings, district officials reported.

"I think we (communicate) very well," a board member said. *"We use many different (vehicles for communication). ... We have print and online (materials)."*

The district offers the unique "ParentVision" communication -- bi-weekly podcasts with tips and information about schools and the district aimed at helping parents support their children. One set of podcast videos on the district's website, for example, offers tips to parents on a host of issues involving the development of children. The ParentVision videos are widely praised both inside and outside the organization, and district officials reported the podcasts were viewed more than 60,000 times in 2010. The district also offers The School Connection, a monthly television news magazine-style program that highlights schools. The show airs 32 times per month on cable access stations in Wake County, and district officials said the shows were downloaded by viewers more than 18,000 times in 2010.

The district has several print products which provide information to parents and the community. The parent newsletter *Parent Matters* is published four times a year and emailed to subscribers, with some hard copies available as well. District officials said more than 60,000 copies of the newsletter were distributed, in English and Spanish. A separate twice-monthly e-newsletter for parents, *Classroom Connection*, focuses on news from the classrooms and is provided to nearly 7,300 subscribers. Another electronic newsletter, *School Community News*, also published twice monthly, provides more than 8,000 subscribers information about action taken by the school board and other information on educational trends, district officials said.

Wake County Public Schools has exemplary, robust capabilities for surveying community members and employees. District officials report the survey operation is led by experts in the field, and large amounts of information available on the website regarding some of the surveys attests to strong potential the district has for success in this area. Wake County's in-house survey capabilities far outstrip those of most other school districts reviewed.

CHALLENGES

The district needs to improve its news creation process and become much more aggressive about anticipating story opportunities and getting out front of opportunities to deliver news and information to the public on major issues, to better inform and encourage media coverage of the district and public understanding of the work of the district.

The communications department for the Wake County district makes an effort to generate news coverage of the school district. The district has a high volume of news releases, for example, posted on its website – far more than most school districts.

“We’ve spent the last several years building relationships with (media),” a district official said. Interviews indicated the Communications Department conducted a “gap analysis” to determine whether the district was reaching all its audiences in its communications efforts. The Wake County district’s communications efforts are in some ways significantly better than those of many school districts in America.

The district, however, fails to aggressively inform and encourage enough news media and public interest in major district initiatives and decisions and fails to create enough news-story style news releases and news events to help inform and encourage stories in the news media about the district.

Part of the problem is due, no doubt, to the district’s lack of a permanent superintendent for much of 2010. *“The last 10 months here has been a holding pattern, waiting for a superintendent,”* a district official said regarding the district’s creation of news opportunities. One official noted that online chats with the public, regular meeting briefings and weekly videocasts for the community are steps that are in the discussion stages under the new superintendent. Another executive agreed: *“I do think people have been more cautious publicly (about promoting news and information about the district) because they don’t know if it’s the party line right now. So our direction is unsettled right now. I’m not sure our arrows are aligned at the moment. I think (the new superintendent) will pull everyone together.”*

The district is hampered in its news production efforts because too many of the district's news releases aren't written in strong enough news style to help generate more media coverage.

The news release below, for example, from March 1, is not written in news style and does not adequately encourage and inform news coverage.

WCPSS Renaissance Model to Provide Support for Four Elementary Schools

March 1, 2011 - North Carolina recently received a \$400 million grant from the Federal Race to the Top competition to be used over the next four years to help increase student achievement throughout our state. The Wake County Public School System will receive \$10.2 million of those funds to be utilized for activities designed to improve the academic achievement of students in our school district.

A portion of these funds will be used for our Renaissance Model. WCPSS developed the Renaissance Model to provide support for four of our elementary schools that could benefit from the extra resources provided by this grant: Barwell Road Elementary, Brentwood Magnet Elementary, Creech Road Elementary and Wilburn Elementary.

Starting with the 2011-12 school year, classrooms in these four Renaissance schools will be outfitted with the latest technology, and additional teaching staff will be provided for each grade level. In addition, there will be flexibility in the school day and school year to provide more instructional time.

A selection process will be held to staff the Renaissance schools. Current employees at each of the four Renaissance schools who wish to participate in the project will be asked to reapply for positions. Employees will also have the opportunity to request a transfer to another school. Principals and teachers with a record of student growth will be recruited with a one-time recruitment bonus to work at these schools. Renaissance school staff will also be eligible to receive annual performance-based compensation.

The infusion of Race to the Top funding is an exciting opportunity for our district to provide additional resources to schools in support of student academic achievement.

Timeliness is important in generating media coverage. The WCPSS news release pictured above makes an important announcement – that the district is getting a \$10.2 million grant – but says only that the grant comes from money awarded to North Carolina “recently.”

A good news release should read like a real news story if it is to offer the media the best help in reporting a story. The news release pictured above is not written in news-story style, with interesting phrasing and a strong news hook to inform and encourage news coverage. The lead paragraph, a critically important part of a news release designed to grab the media's attention and generate coverage, says only that the \$10.2 million will be “utilized for activities” to “improve the academic achievement of students.” The lead is not sharp and specific enough to generally interest most of the media. The news release also has no quotes from district leaders to attract interest from the media. A search of the internet did not immediately reveal any media coverage of the news announcement about the grant.

The following news release about Wake County schools being recognized for improving behavior of students could have been a much more successful news story had it been written in news-story style.

WCPSS Schools Recognized for Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Programs

Feb. 16, 2011 - Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) Programs are helping the Wake County Public School System impact the learning environments in our schools in order to support high student performance and to reduce behavioral problems.

Schools that have implemented PBIS work to integrate their Safe Schools Plans, Character Education efforts and strategies, and discipline efforts in order to make schools caring and safe communities for learning. PBIS is a systematic approach that establishes and reinforces clear behavioral expectations. The schools' staff members adopt a common approach to discipline that is proactive, instructional, and outcome-based. The goal is to help educate all students, even students with challenging behaviors.

The North Carolina PBIS Initiative began a state recognition program for PBIS schools during the 2007-2008 school year. This past year, 36 WCPSS schools earned recognition through the program by providing evidence of implementation progress.

Three levels of implementation are recognized: Green Ribbon, Model and Exemplar. Schools meeting Exemplar status are required to demonstrate increases for at least two consecutive years in both implementation fidelity and school outcomes, using multiple data sources. Statewide, 237 NC schools earned recognition for the 2009-2010 school year. WCPSS's 36 schools represented the largest number for any school district in the state. Not only did WCPSS have more schools meeting Exemplar status, it also had several schools meeting this level of recognition for multiple years.

The following award-winning schools were recently recognized at a Regional PBIS meeting in Greensboro:

Conn Elementary Green Ribbon*
 Creech Road Elementary Green Ribbon
 Dillard Drive Elementary Green Ribbon*
 East Garner Elementary Green Ribbon*

The news release excerpted above is filled with educational jargon and fails to adequately spotlight what probably is an important effort by schools to improve school safety and discipline -- very important issues for parents. It would be virtually impossible for members of the news media to decipher, from the lead paragraph and the remainder of the news release, what the "Positive Behavior Intervention and Support" program actually does. The release uses vague language such as "support high student performance" and "make schools caring and safe communities for learning" while providing no details of how the program works and how schools use it.

The news release waits until the fifth paragraph to reveal that some Wake County schools actually won awards for this program, further eroding the possibility of the news release helping to generate widespread media coverage.

Still, some community news organizations carried the news release virtually word-for-word, underscoring that Wake County has an audience for its news and should make a strong effort to generate more compelling and interesting stories for that audience. Had the district put more news-story style detail into the news release about the program and how it helps schools, the

district could have provided the public much more compelling and interesting information when the news release was reported in the community news organizations. There was no indication in an initial review of news organization websites that the story was reported by larger news organizations in Wake County.

The following news release on ACT scores misses an opportunity tell a more compelling story.

Wake's Average ACT Score Surpasses State and National Averages

August 20, 2010 -Wake County seniors taking the ACT college admissions exam scored above the state and national averages for 2010 with an average ACT score that was 0.4 points higher than the previous year's score, according to results released by the ACT.

The average ACT composite score for WCPSS was 23, while the average ACT composite score for the state was 21.9 and 21 for the nation.

Wake County's gain of 0.4 points this year continues an improvement trend from 2006 to present. A change of 0.3 points or more is considered significant by the ACT.

Approximately, 12 percent of WCPSS graduating seniors - 1,135 students - took the ACT in 2010. On average, they outperformed other seniors in the state on each of the four assessments by a 7 percentage point advantage on the combination of all four assessments.

ACT test scores are among the factors that colleges and universities use in their admissions process. While most North Carolina high school students take the SAT college entrance exam, the ACT is growing in popularity. Sixteen percent of North Carolina's 2010 graduates - 14,673 students - took the ACT.

-WCPSS-

The news release above about ACT scores includes no quotes from district leaders about the improvement in scores and the district's standing above state and national average. It contains no stories of students who took the ACT and are preparing for college. The news release dutifully reports the scores but does little else to encourage and inspire media coverage.

An important news announcement about WCPSS enrollment for the 2009-10 school year contained mostly numbers, with very little messaging and context. In the news release pictured below, there were no quotes from district officials to better inform the public about what the new enrollment numbers meant. The news release does not adequately create a story line about the bigger-picture issue of the district's long standing strong reputation for excellence.



WCPSS Sees 1,893 More Students for 2009-10

October 1, 2009 - Wake County Public School System student enrollment increased to 139,599 on the 20th day of the 2009-10 school year, 1,893 students more than last year.

The 20th day enrollment is a snapshot of one day's school enrollment that is annually reported to the state. The count was taken on September 22 for traditional calendar schools. It was taken earlier for multi-track, year round schools and modified calendar schools.

On September 22nd, WCPSS schools were serving 140,234 students, an increase of 2,528 more than the 2008-09 official 20th day count. Most of that increase occurred in multi-track, year-round schools after the official 20th day count was taken.

The increase in enrollment of 1,893 students is less than enrollment increases in recent years. In 2008-09, enrollment increased by 3,700 students; in 2007-08, the increase was 6,930 and in 2006-07, the increase was 7,568.

The increase to 139, 599 students this year is slightly less than the projection for 140,012 students. The Wake County Planning Department and the WCPSS Growth and Planning Department jointly develop the projections and review the data to see what they can learn from it. The change of date for kindergarten enrollment and the serious downturn in the national economy had an impact on WCPSS enrollment. Other large school systems in the state saw slower growth.

Largest schools

The school system has 67,748 elementary school students, 31,691 middle school students and 40,160 high school students. Last year, the school system had a total of 137,706 students with 67,508 elementary school students, 30,921 middle school students and 39,227 high school students.

The largest high schools are Wakefield High with 2,813 students; Enloe High with 2,657; Leesville Road High with 2,501; and Millbrook High with 2,432.

The largest middle schools are West Lake Middle with 1,448; Salem Middle with 1,319; Durant Road Middle with 1,297; North Garner Middle with 1,258; Heritage Middle with 1,257; and Leesville Road Middle with 1,252. All of these schools operate on the multi-track, year-round calendar.

The largest elementary schools are Durant Road Elementary with 979; Salem Elementary with 948; Middle Creek Elementary with 948; Davis Drive Elementary with 945; Laurel Park Elementary with 933; and Turner Creek Road Elementary with 924. All of these schools operate on the multi-track, year-round calendar, except for Davis Drive which operates on the traditional calendar.

WCPSS 20th-Day Enrollment

139,599 - 2009-10

114,068 - 2004-05

94,782 - 1999-00

Members of the Communications Department clearly have the skill sets to produce stronger news stories. A number of news releases featured on the school district's website are written in much stronger news-story style, giving them more likelihood of success in informing and encouraging media coverage.

WCPSS Teachers Set Records in Earning National Board Certification

December 15, 2010 - More than 300 Wake County Public School System educators earned certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards this year, helping WCPSS establish a number of records in supporting teachers who pursue and achieve National Board Certification.

WCPSS is first in the nation and the state in the total number of teachers who earned certification this year. And WCPSS now has more than 2,000 teachers who have earned certification.

WCPSS had 319 teachers earn certification this year, the largest number in a single year to earn certification for a school district in NC. In each of the last two years, 197 earned certification. With this latest round of teacher certifications, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards reports that WCPSS currently employs a total of 2,031 teachers who have earned National Board certification. This is the largest number of National Board certified teachers in any school district in the U.S.

The NC Department of Public Instruction reports that 2,277 teachers earned certification across the state this year. North Carolina had the largest class of teachers earning certification of any state this year. DPI reports that 17,957 North Carolina teachers have earned certification from the National Board.

Top WCPSS Schools

Knightdale High had 13 teachers earn National Board certification, the most of any WCPSS school this year. Green Hope and Sanderson high schools each had 10 teachers earn certification.

For WCPSS: A record setting year

#1 in the nation	Total number of teachers in a school district who earned certification this year.
#1 in the nation	Total number of teachers employed by a school district who have earned certification
#1 in NC	Largest class of teachers in a school district to earn certification in a year

The news release excerpted above has a strong, news-story style lead with little of the education jargon that weighs down some of the other releases. A story such as this one is much more likely to inform and encourage media coverage.

Some board members raised concerns that not enough news and information about the district is promoted by the Communications Department. Board members and district employees generally agree the district receives a lot of media coverage, and the coverage is mostly fair.

"But I don't think they push out enough information to the media," a board member said. *"They should be selling our programs and ... what we are trying to do."* Asked about outreach by the district to the media to improve the coverage, the board members said *"it doesn't exist."* Another board member, asked how well the district communicates with the public, responded *"poorly. Education junkies, parents who check the website, they know (information), but the average person doesn't know to go to the website."* The board members praised the chief communications officer but said *"there's not a lot of vision there (in the Communications Department). For a school system of this caliber, it's disappointing. There's not a big vision that drives what they do in a strategic way."*

A district executive, while very supportive of the work of the Communications Department, said communication with the media and the public about school construction and improvement under the district's 2006 bond program has *"slowed down"* since those responsibilities were shifted away from a position funded through the construction program and to the Communications Department. Promotion of the school construction program should still be a priority for the district, with officials noting there remains about \$100 million in work to be done.

Another district executive said the Communications Department needs to be more proactive. *"I wish we could get more positive out. Usually it's reactionary. It's something that's happened. They (the Communications Department) could do more of that (proactive communications). It's mainly reactionary."* The district needs to promote more stories and information to the media, not just through electronic communications with parents, another district executive said. *"I think what we don't do a good job of is seeking out those good stories and pushing them to the papers. We have become very*

reliant on electronic sources, so there is a piece of the community we miss," the executive said.

Another district executive, asked if the district produces major news on big-picture issues and drives that message with the media and through to the public, responded *"some. ... The media doesn't really care much for that. It gets announced and kind of goes away."*

To be sure, some board members disagree with others that the promotion of the work of the district is lacking in some cases. *"I think they (the Communications Department) do a very good job. We have a good website. We have a good TV image when things happen. The people who respond (to the media) do a very good job. I'm very happy with what they're doing,"* a board member said. Another board member agreed. *"I think they (the Communications Department) do a good job, a great job,"* the board member said.

The Communications Department has mostly strong support from the executive team. Asked if the Communications Department pushes a lot of information out to the media to keep the public informed, one district executive said: *"My sense is quite a bit (of information is promoted). I see frequent press releases. Michael and his team have done a good job being proactive."* Another top executive tended to agree. *"The positive is done without overdoing it. You have to temper it with how much do you push before you go too far. I think they (the Communications Department) do a pretty good job with that,"* the district executive said. Another district executive praised the communications team as well. *"A lot of that success has to do with Michael Evans' background. He's the type of person who says 'let's get out the good news, let's be proactive and help generate stories.' We have moved toward a much more proactive stance. Before Michael got here it felt very reactionary. ... Michael has always been very responsive to principals. ... It's a great comfort to send media to the Communications Department, and he can take that burden off the principals,"* the district executive said.

School principals interviewed also unanimously praised the work of the Communications Department. *"I think we have an excellent Communications Department,"* one principal said. Another said *"they are very supportive"* and another principal noted *"they understand their mission is to support us."*

Still, an executive expressed frustration that more good news about the district does not show up in the media, an indication that more aggressive proactive outreach is needed, particularly on significant district-wide issues.

The comments by some also reveal that the Wake district needs to have a better understanding, and expectation, of how positive news that reflects well on the school district can also be very interesting news that the media will want to cover.

Unfortunately, the attitude that good news doesn't sell is widespread in the district. The problem, one district executive said, is the concept of *"good news not being news."* Another expressed a similar concern about negative media coverage. *"We sell papers, people watch us in the news. We're omnipresent. I know (the media's) job is to sell their product. They will do (positive) stories occasionally, but that's not what sells. ... More often it's a point of conflict."* A district executive strongly supportive of the Communications Department's work still said the district has had trouble getting the media to cover positive news, especially over the past year. *"I'd love to say good news sells, but other things sell better,"* that district executive said. *"(Negative media coverage) does have an impact on the community's feelings about the district. ... We still get good press. We've always had a very good relationship with local news sources and Michael's department has helped us build those relationships ... but more recently the negative press has gotten a lot more attention than the positive."* A different district executive expressed almost exactly the same pessimism about the district's chances of getting positive stories covered. *"They like controversy, things that will sell papers. A child making straight A's doesn't sell news. Seldom do you see as much printed about the good things that are happening,"* the executive said.

Some teachers interviewed expressed frustration about negative media coverage. *"It's all very negative,"* one teacher said of the media coverage. Another noted disagreements between board members can generate negative news coverage that impacts the entire system. *"It's hard when your worst critics are the board members,"* a teacher said.

Asked about morale among teachers, one described it as *"low, very bad."* Another teacher said *"It's been very hard for me to read the newspaper"*

every morning and go in to work. Last year was very difficult. ... The implication to hear from media is that if kids are not achieving, it's the teacher's fault. There's very little done to temper that. It's easy to take it personally," a teacher said.

Some interviewed believe a more aggressive posture by the district in providing information and a coherent message to the public about the goals and ideas of the district is important. *"Seventy percent of the folks in Wake County don't have kids in (WCPSS), but there has to be a symbolic relationship between them and the schools. We have to be cognizant that we need to talk to that group of people too as we put things out to parents. We need to do a better job of framing issues, framing (news announcements) that will catch the attention of citizens and taxpayers that don't have a vested interest in the school system and help them understand why they should,"* a board member said.

Generally, district officials described the media coverage of Wake County schools as mostly fair. But a number of officials and others interviewed talked about the negative feelings left over after a recent broadcast by television comedian Stephen Colbert. *"The Colbert report made us the laughing stock of the country. ... I feel such pride in Wake County, and to watch us be made fun of was bad,"* a board member said.

Others said there are times when local coverage can be unfair. A board member noted that the major daily newspaper in Raleigh *"will take accurate statements and print them out of context."* The board member said local television coverage tends to be *"generally fair or balanced."* A parent interviewed for this report agreed that television coverage of the work of the school board is generally fairer than the newspaper coverage. *"Sometimes there is a disconnect,"* one parent said, describing the difference between what a parent saw happening at a board meeting and what was reported in a local newspaper. *"The TV stations are better."* A district executive agreed that the television news coverage tends to be fairer. *"I think we are treated reasonably well by the media. Sometimes I've sat in (a board) meeting and heard what was said, and I didn't (read a similar version of events in the newspapers). They put their slant on it. But overall we're treated reasonably fairly."*

Still, others said the newspaper coverage is fair also. A parent said newspaper reporters covered the district's curriculum audit and reported "*front and center*" when the district has done well.

Wake County certainly has the resources in the Communications Department to deliver more news and information to the media to inform and encourage coverage of the district. The staff of the Communications Department is larger than that of many other school districts across the country and includes not only the chief communications officer but also a director of communications and three public information officers to assist with the development of news stories and information.

The district has failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the school board meetings to create news coverage opportunities; disputes between board members have affected public opinion about the school district and morale among employees, many said.

The school board meeting agenda can be a gold mine of news stories for districts if officials identify news story opportunities in the agenda in advance and develop them into ready-to-report stories. Typically, though, the Wake County district does not promote the school board agenda as a news opportunity for local media.

Officials said the district posts the school board meeting agenda to its website a few days in advance of the board meeting but does not promote individual agenda items for news coverage. A major reason the district does not aggressively promote board agenda items for news coverage and public consumption in advance of the board meetings is fear that the school board may be divided on an issue. "*We have not sold stories in advance of the board meetings because (board members are sometimes divided on issues),*" a district official said. "*We're the administration. We let the board (set) policy, then we figure it out. It's managing (the information) after the fact (after the board votes) rather than managing in front.*" Another district official said promoting individual school board agenda items for coverage in advance of the board meeting would be "*dangerous. No matter what your story is, you're likely offend a board member.*" A comment from another district executive underscored that the district does too little to promote the

good news about the work of the school board: *"If there is something controversial, (the media is) there at the board meetings."*

There also may be in Wake County institutional roadblocks to working prior to the board meetings to generate news coverage of the important issues under consideration by the board. Some district officials interviewed described "*obstacles*" to getting from various central office departments information about agenda items going to the board for consideration and said more cooperation will be needed among administrators to generate the needed information for advance publicity about the school board meeting agenda. Another institutional barrier could be limited time to develop and make some board agenda items available for promotion by the Communications Department before the board meetings.

District leaders said an electronic newsletter about the school board's work is produced sometimes several days after the board meeting, but virtually no full-scale promotion of the board agenda is done before the board meetings. Asked why it sometimes takes several days for a post-board meeting report to be produced, a Communications Department official said *"sometimes it takes several days to figure out what happened."*

Indeed, the district's Communications Department moved somewhat slowly to announce an important vote by the school board from the March 1, 2011 meeting approving the district's new mission, vision and set of core beliefs. The news release announcing the vote came two days after the vote, far too late in most circumstances to generate significant news coverage. The news release announcing the vote contained no information about how the new mission, vision and set of core beliefs was different from what the district previously had in place – information that would be important to encouraging media coverage of the issue. The news release was not written in strong news-story style that would give it the best chance of informing and encouraging media coverage. The release contained only one quote from a board member and largely simply listed the new mission, vision and core beliefs with no other context. The graphic below shows a portion of the news release.

Board of Education Approves New Mission, Vision and Core Beliefs

March 3, 2011 - The Wake County Board of Education has come to agreement and voted approval of a new mission, vision and set of core beliefs.

The board voted approval of these guiding principles at its meeting on March 1, after spending a day on Friday, Feb. 25 working with Superintendent Tony Tata in a planning retreat.

Board Chair Ron Margiotta offered his thanks to the board for taking part in the critical discussions regarding what's important for the students and staff of the school system.

"We reaffirmed among all board members the importance of insuring every child receives a quality education," said Margiotta. "I would like to thank Superintendent Tata for making the day possible. He worked very hard to identify information and topics that he knew were important to the school system in moving forward and spent many hours in preparation that allowed the board to complete the retreat in one day."

Margiotta offered his thanks to facilitator Jim Huges whose participation was part of the support from the Broad Foundation since Superintendent Tata is a Broad graduate.

At its March 1 meeting, the board approved the following mission, vision and core beliefs:

Mission

The Wake County Public School System will significantly increase achievement for all students by providing a world class education that equips students with the knowledge and expertise to become successful, productive citizens.

Vision

WCPSS will serve as the national standard for increasing student achievement in the 21st century. Highly effective teachers are empowered to raise the achievement of all children and will provide students with high quality classroom instruction that fosters intellectual development.

WCPSS recognizes children have different needs and is committed to ensuring all are challenged to reach their full potential. Students will graduate in increasingly high percentages and compete successfully as productive citizens. WCPSS will continue this community's proud tradition of education leadership and academic excellence with a proactive school staff effectively supported by the Board of Education and Central Services.

There was no indication on the website that the district attempted to generate interest from the news media with a news release about the upcoming vote on the mission, vision and beliefs in advance of the board's upcoming important vote. Subsequently, most of the media coverage of the board meeting focused on a split vote by board members over the district's legislative agenda.



Wake school board requests more voting power for chairman

BY T. KEUNG HUI - Staff Writer
PUBLISHED IN: LOCAL

RALEIGH -- The Wake County school board voted 5-3 on Tuesday to ask state legislators to give the board's leader power to vote more often.

The board will ask the General Assembly to change the state law that now allows the chairman to vote only to break ties. The restriction was imposed as part of the state law that resulted in the merger of the Wake County and Raleigh City school systems in 1976.

"It lets the public know where the board chair stands," said school board member Chris Malone, who supported the change.

But other board members argued that the policy of only allowing the chairman to break ties helps make the position more impartial.

"I felt the policy we've had since 1976 has served us well," said school board member Kevin Hill, who opposed the request.

School board Chairman Ron Margiotta has found himself breaking a number of ties over the past 15 months as the Republican board majority has passed changes such as eliminating the use of diversity in the student assignment policy.

Margiotta said not being able to vote on all issues limited his ability to let the community know where he stands on issues.

Board members had initially planned to delay the vote for two weeks but supporters of the change raised concerns about missing the March 31 deadline to file new legislation in the state House.

Tata, Barber

Wake County School Board Chairman Ron Margiotta will have a private meeting with Rev. William Barber, NAACP.

Barber had requested a meeting letter saying he wanted to discuss his relationship with his alma mater, Wake University. Margiotta told Tata that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's elimination policy, including filing a federal civil rights suit, is an accreditation agency.

Tata agreed to the meeting and looked forward to "a productive conversation." Tata had an on-one meeting but wanted to bring people to the central administration building.

The story in the local major newspaper, excerpted in the graphic above, did not mention the board's vote on the new mission, vision and beliefs.

The district seldom produces news announcements about specific upcoming school board votes, and often delays by days news announcements of board action.

On the critically important issue of the school board budget, a major news story for any school district, it appears that news of the school board's vote on the budget was promoted by the district via news release three days late in 2010.

Board Approves 2010-11 Budget

April 23, 2010 - The Board of Education approved the 2010-11 operating budget for the Wake County Public School System last Tuesday making severe cuts as state funding shrinks, local funding is expected to remain the same and school enrollment continues to grow.

School enrollment is expected to increase by 3,800 students for 2010-11 and the school system will be opening four new schools: Heritage High, Holly Grove Middle, Mills Park Middle and Alston Ridge Elementary.

While demands for service grow, the continued economic downturn is affecting state and local governments. Over the past 16 months, school funding has been affected by a series of actions: a \$35 million reduction in state funding, \$15.7 million in budget reversions returned to the state and county, and the state furlough that meant all WCPSS employees lost one-half of one percent of annual salary. For 2010-11, the school system faces increased costs and decreased revenue.

Increased local costs will include \$2.5 million for hiring school-based employees for the additional students and schools. Additional costs include \$3.1 million for retirement benefits, \$1 million for health care and \$650,000 to maintain existing teacher supplemental pay and extra duty pay schedules.

Decreased revenues include an \$8.1 million discretionary budget reduction from the state and a \$6 million decline in local revenue. Anticipating these budget difficulties, the school system developed plans for reducing Central Services budgets by more than \$20 million. These reductions are in Central Services staff and funding.

The Central Services staff reductions have included eliminating the jobs of 68 current employees and the elimination of 57 vacant positions. There are also significant reductions in Central Services non-personnel budgets. Reductions in spending include \$7 million in Facilities Services, \$2.5 million in Technology Services and \$1.1 million in Instructional Services.

The board is required to adopt a proposed budget prior to local and state funding for schools being finalized. The governor presented a proposed budget on Tuesday that will be debated by the legislature and adopted later this year.

The board budget now goes to the Wake County Board of Commissioners who will approve a county budget for 2010-11 that will include the county appropriation to the school system. If there is a difference between the board's proposed budget and final revenues included in state and county funding, the system will make additional changes.

The news release pictured above announces on April 23, 2010 that the school board approved the district budget "last Tuesday", apparently April 20. The apparently overdue news release contained some details of the budget decision but no quotes from any school board members or district officials to enhance the story or help the community further understand the issue.

Board Authorizes Use of Search Firm and Funds for Superintendent Search

June 4, 2010 - At its June 1 meeting, the Board of Education approved requests from the Superintendent Search Committee to authorize use of a search firm in the process and to designate \$125,000 from the undesignated fund balance for the superintendent search.

The Superintendent Search Committee is an ad hoc committee formed for the purpose of assisting in the recruiting/hiring of a new superintendent. Board vice-chair Debra Goldman, who chairs the search committee, presented information to the Committee of the Whole on May 4 about the use of a search firm. The board offered its support and requested that the committee gather more information. In meetings on May 19 and May 25, the committee reviewed proposals and developed a request for funding.

The Committee plans to present recommendations for a search firm to the board for approval prior to the development of a service contract. Funds not used in the superintendent search will revert to the fund balance.

The news release pictured above reports a school board decision three days after the board made its decision, too late to generally inform and encourage news media coverage. The news release is also poorly constructed and includes difficult-to-decipher language, such as the lead paragraph's reference to the decision to "designate" "undesignated" funds.

The news release below reports on an important decision by the school board – two days later.

School Meal Prices to Increase for 2010-11

April 8, 2010 - For the first time in years, the price of meals will increase at school. At its meeting April 6, the Board of Education approved increases in the price of breakfast and lunch for 2010-11.

WCPSS Child Nutrition Services requested meal price increases of 20 cents for breakfast and 25 cents for lunch. This will make the costs of elementary breakfast one dollar and the costs of middle and high school breakfast \$1.25. The cost of elementary lunch will increase to \$2 and the costs of middle and high school lunch \$2.25.

Note: reduced price breakfast and lunch prices did not change. For grades K-12, reduced breakfast is 30¢ and reduced lunch is 40¢.

This is the first change in any meal prices since 2004. This is the first time elementary breakfast prices have changed since 1995.

Child Nutrition Services is an enterprise fund and is required to maintain a balanced budget. Enterprise funds require the full costs of providing the goods or services be financed primarily through payments made by parents and federal funds thus removing the expenses from the tax rate.

-wcpss-

This potentially very important story, that the school board held the line on meal prices for six years before needing to raise them, was not reported via this news release until April 8, two days after the board vote. The news release contains no quotes from district officials or board members to explain this important decision and waits until the fourth paragraph to report that the meal price increase is the first since 2004. A news announcement written more in news style and released immediately after the school board meeting would have had a better opportunity to inform and encourage news coverage.

The news release pictured below was timelier but still missed an important opportunity to tell a newsworthy district story.

New Board Members Take Oath of Office

December 1, 2009 - Four new members of the Wake County Board of Education took the oath of office this afternoon. In a ceremony that filled the board room, Debra Goldman, Chris Malone, Deborah Prickett and John Tedesco were sworn into office.

Each new member took the oath with a judge and participant they had selected.

Goldman took the oath of office with Judge I. Beverly Lake, Jr. who served as Chief Justice of the NC Supreme Court while her mother Sorra Cohn held the Bible for her. Goldman, who lives in Cary, represents District 9.

Malone took the oath of office with Judge Fred G. Morrison, Jr. who is a Senior Administrative Law Judge while his brother Paul Malone held the Bible for him. Malone, who lives in Wake Forest, represents District 1.

Prickett took the oath of office with Judge Joe R. John, Sr. who serves on the NC Court of Appeals while her son Grayson Prickett held the Bible for her. Prickett, who lives in Raleigh, represents District 7.

Tedesco took the oath of office with Judge Fred G. Morrison, Jr. who is a Senior Administrative Law Judge while his Pastor Abel Grande held the Bible for him. Tedesco, who lives in Garner, represents District 2.

The ceremony concluded with board chair Kevin L Hill welcoming the new members to the board and inviting those present to a reception to honor the newest members of the Wake County Board of Education.

The news release announcing the oath of office for new board members was published in a timely fashion, but the news release contained no quotes from the new board members, no biographical information about the new board members and no information about the incoming board members' top priorities. As is the case in many of the news releases featured on the website, the oath of office announcement contains the barest of details with no compelling story line to inform and encourage media coverage.

Several school board members interviewed expressed frustration at the lack of strategic communication about the important work of the board. *"If you're talking about things the board is trying to get done or has done, they (the Communications Department) don't really do a good job of telling people what we're doing, what our vision is, why we're doing what we're doing, what is our motivation. They miss that. I don't know why that is. ... Letting people know why we are doing things is important,"* a board member said. *"The Communications Department should be a public relations department and not just communications. They should expand to selling to the public on why and what it is the board is doing ... and how it benefits them."*

A different board member expressed similar concerns. *"I'd like to see the Communications Department have a little more of a PR function. Putting things on the website seems to be their panacea for everything,"* the board member said. Another board member agreed that the Communications Department does not adequately promote the work of the school board. *"I*

don't think we (promote news about the school board)," a board member said. "We're not marketing ourselves (the work of the board) to the media."

Another board member offered a similar critique of the news promotion operation at the district. *"They (the Communications Department) are too reactive rather than proactive. They are non-active. They report on things that that go on in schools, but they don't do anything in reaching out to the public and letting them know what's going on with the school board,"* the board member said. *"All they do is post it (the board meeting agenda) on the website and they don't go beyond that. They just report on part of the outcomes ... I would raise questions of them about why they were not promoting things going in the system, and they would say they were not there to be a press corps for the school system. We need that."*

Another board member expressed a similar critique of the Communications Department. The promotion to the public of the work of the school board has been *"horrible, zero,"* the board member said. *"I feel we're always being reactive and not proactive. They do nothing. I think we have plenty of people (in the Communications Department). There is a disconnect. When we had the shift of philosophy on the board, maybe they don't like what we're doing, maybe they would rather do nothing than get involved. There is no advance promotion of anything we're doing. ... The public has looked at us like everything is a 5-4 vote, which is not so. But we never see that in the media."*

The Communications Department missed a big opportunity to generate more positive news coverage and information for the public by failing to adequately promote the school board leader's state of the schools address, a first for the district, a district executive said. *"It could have been promoted more. It had never been done before, and it wasn't promoted. ... I have no idea why they (the Communications Department) didn't promote it."*

Another concern was prevalent in many interviews for this audit: disagreements among individual school board members sometimes take on a tone that damages the public's view of the school district.

Parents interviewed virtually unanimously echoed the concern that disagreements between board members often present a negative image of the district. *"They've been on Facebook sniping at each other, in the newspaper and on TV. It's shameful behavior,"* a parent said. Another parent

said the board members are *"not held to the same standards as our teachers for how they conduct themselves."*

School principals interviewed virtually unanimously agreed also that the issue is a problem for the district. *"I've heard (from parents) they (the board) need to stop fighting and putting us on national news,"* one principal said. Another principal said the conflicts between school board members are demoralizing the school staffs. *"I try to keep them from focusing on the board,"* the principal said of the school staff. *"They are concerned every time there's an article or discussion with the board that there is never a student connection or child connection, it's always parents and neighborhoods."* Asked if the disputes between board members hurt the image of the district, one principal said *"absolutely"* and another said *"yes, without question."* Another said *"I stopped reading (the news about board meetings). It was hurting my feeling about my job. I have to feel good about what I'm doing."* Another principal noted *"it is affecting the morale of my parents and staff."*

Top district officials tended to agree that the disputes between board members have helped create a negative image of the district and are hurting morale in the organization. *"Wake County had the national superintendent of the year a few years ago. We were ranked (among the best) districts in the nation. We were riding high and had a great reputation. Suddenly everything changed to a very negative perception. That has hurt morale,"* a district executive said. *"It's embarrassing when you're out in public and people say 'what in the world is going on in Wake County?'"* Another district executive said *"What people regret most is in the school system, nobody ever thought about politics in the schools and in our work. Now it seems the school system is very polarized along political lines. Now people think decisions are made along political lines. That hurts morale for teachers."*

Concern about negative coverage of board member disputes probably is holding the district back from more heavily promoting the work of the board, a board member said. *"Because of what's going on now and where we are as a board and a district,"* promotion of the work of the board is difficult, the board member said. *"It makes it hard for the media and the communications department to get behind and promote what's happening (at board meetings). They (the Communications Department) try to do it (promote news about the board) in the most middle-of-the-road kind of way but it's the dance they have to play. ... The bad thing ... it has politicized and made*

education a partisan issue, and that's the biggest detriment to what's going on here. That makes it more difficult for the Communications Department to report what's happening (at the board) without stepping in to the political side of things," the board member said.

Board members acknowledged it has been a difficult time for the school board. *"This is a very passionate group of people. There is disagreement sometimes. ... I was elected by people to do certain things and that's what I'm trying to deliver. That doesn't mean I don't have respect for people. Disagreement is a normal part of life,"* a board member said.

Two other board members agreed the disputes between the board members have fueled a negative image of the district. One board member said the media negatively portrays the board because the board does negative things. *"If you weren't doing something negative there's nothing negative for media to portray. ... For the most part (the media) report what happened,"* said the board member, who predicted problems over the disputes between the board members are *"temporary. Long term, but it will blow over. It will resolve. ... It's easy to blame the media. We have to manage our image and control our actions because it's going to be on TV."* The board member said colleagues on the board need to learn to disagree without being disagreeable. *"We will always have winners and losers in politics. How you go about that as you win and lose, if you are a gracious winner and loser, and doing that with professionalism and decorum is important. We have folks who don't understand losing or how to lose or how to advocate for a position. ... It's a behavior and actions. Nasty stuff and name calling -- that's going to be negative"* in media reports, the board member said. Another board member said the board member disputes are *"having a negative impact on the district's image. ... This is putting a real burden on the superintendent, but how he performs will perhaps change that."* The board member said the disputes between the board members have had an effect on *"not only students and their families but also on teachers and principals. People are just really deciding whether they are going to stay in the system. ... It makes me feel terrible when I hear that."*

District officials have hope the new superintendent will help pull the district together. *"If we don't have hope, we're done,"* a district executive said. *"His (the superintendent's) job is going to be challenging. We're behind him all the way, and we hope he can make some sense out of this and get a handle*

on it and work with (the board). We desperately need someone to help us get a handle on what's happening, someone with a vision to come in and take us to the next step, the next level and ... get away from fighting and mean spiritedness."

The Communications Department has actually improved in the wake of controversy surrounding the board, one board member said. *"I think they (the Communications Department) could do better. There has been some improvement recently. The controversy ... has made them better. They have started to rise to that occasion,"* the board member said. *"When things start seeming to fall apart, you're trying to catch up with the good stories. Since then, I've heard more good stories about Wake and the things the district has been doing recently. ... The Communications Department has done better about how to present their information in a way that people are paying attention."*

The district does not officially track its news coverage on commercial television stations and does not share some television reports about the district with employees, board members and the public.

The advancement of technology has made it relatively easy and inexpensive for a school district organization to keep track of its media coverage, particularly television coverage. The collective audiences of local television news stations is much larger than the readership of most local daily newspapers in America, so keeping track of the television coverage of the district and sharing that coverage with school district officials or community members who may not have seen it is a desirable activity in the effort to broaden communication channels.

The Wake County district does a good job of tracking print coverage, with print news clips sent electronically to school district officials daily. But in the arena where most community members nationwide get their news, television, the school district does not formally keep track of the coverage. Asked how the district keeps up with its television coverage, a district official said *"anecdotally. We produce an electronic clipping report every day that covers all print media, and a Google news alert. ... TV coverage is harder."*

The district's automated phone messaging systems are underutilized in some cases

The Wake County district currently uses two separate automated phone messaging systems; the School Messenger system is used at the school level to keep parents informed, and the Alert Now system is used district wide for emergency announcements. School district officials acknowledge that the usage of the automated notification systems varies widely by school.

"Principals use it, some more than others," a district executive said. A board member stated flatly: *"We have underutilized our phone messaging system. Some of the schools will do a weekly call the same night every week, other ones only use it when a lot of stuff is coming up. I think it should be used more, and not just by the schools but from the system (district wide) too."*

A top district executive said the phone message system needs to be used more often to give the community important district-wide information and *"we also need to expand who uses it."*

Principals interviewed confirmed the wide variety in the amount of usage of the phone messaging system and the messages delivered by it. Several principals reported using the system weekly, but another said the phone message system is only used *"when I think it's something they really need to listen to because we'll get multiple call backs (from parents)."* Another principal reported most middle and high schools use the system more frequently than elementary schools. They all agreed parents like getting information from the district via the automated phone calls.

Some principals reported making phone calls on sports and other co-curricular events, but others said they don't call parents about those subjects. Such phone messaging systems are often used around the country to tell parents about major new developments at schools, such as a new math program under review or other curriculum, but one Wake County principal said *"I would never think about announcing I'm thinking about changing a math program"* through the use of the phone system and ask for feedback. *"I wouldn't just put an issue out there."*

None of the principals interviewed used the survey functions of the phone message system to get feedback from parents.

The district also isn't using the phone message system as a generator of news story ideas for the media. When school leaders use such automated notification systems well, the information provided to parents can be an excellent source of news stories for the media and the public. But district officials said no one at the central district level monitors or reviews the phone calls for information that could lead to the development of interesting news stories and information for the public about the district.

In an otherwise well-produced ParentVision video about the district's inclement weather communications procedures, the district fails to mention that parents can and will be contacted via phone message when classes are canceled because of weather conditions. The video notes that the district will post a message to its website about closings and will email parents but makes no mention of parents receiving a recorded phone message through the School Messenger or Alert Now systems.

District executives interviewed expressed the belief that most schools are using the phone message systems to keep parents informed. *"Parents will get calls and know about things before they see it in the news media,"* a district official said. But few said they have seen reports on the usage of the systems and suspected that the usage of the powerful communications tool varies by school. *"Not all principals use the system the same way. I have never seen a report on which schools are using it,"* a district executive said. A board member agreed: *"I've asked for reports (on the usage of the phone messaging system), but I've never seen a report."*

Parents interviewed generally liked being informed through the phone message system about issues of importance, but they wanted more consistency in the importance and timeliness of the messages. Parents expressed frustration that one of the message systems currently used requires them to answer the call and then press a button to hear the message.

The parents said some principals make a weekly call with information and some don't. *"I like the calls,"* one parent said. Another noted, though, *"I got a call last Thursday to tell me my kid would be out (of school) a week later. I should have gotten that call last week."* The phone message system is

"effective if used well, if valid information for reasonable things is provided," a parent said. Another called for consistency, though. *"There needs to be consistency across the board. From some (schools, parents get so many calls that) we get tired of them, and (from other schools) we get next to nothing. There needs to be some guidelines,"* a parent said.

Parents interviewed also wanted to see the phone message system used by the district to deliver more information about important issues affecting the entire district. *"There are no big picture issues on the calls. That would be nice,"* a parent said.

Using the automated phone messaging system to keep district officials and the public informed is an important activity board members want to see. *"I would like to see (Superintendent Tata) using that messaging system as often as he feels a need because we all need to know what's happening,"* a board member said. *"He's a very good communicator."*

The audio quality in some ParentVision videos is sometimes inadequate.

The Wake County district deserves credit for expending resources to create the ParentVision videos to provide important information to parents regarding developmental issues of children. However, a review of the ParentVision videos on the website showed the quality of the audio accompanying some of the videos was substandard.

For example, a video entitled *"Does Your Five-Year-Old Need Preschool Special Education Services?"* contained an introduction by a district official that was difficult to hear. It seemed in the video that the microphone recording the official's opening comments was too far away from the official as he made the remarks. The interviewee in the video is also difficult to hear. Other video segments in that series of ParentVision broadcasts suffer from similar audio quality problems. The thin, echoing sound quality distracts from the importance of the videos, which provides interesting information for parents of young children. In another video, entitled *"Community Workshops for Student Assignment,"* the volume of the audio was substantially lower than that of many of the other videos.

The Wake County district does not use the social networking giant Facebook as a communications tool and may be reluctant in general to engage the public on interactive websites.

With more than 500 million users worldwide, the social networking internet site Facebook has exploded as a preeminent communications tool for individuals, businesses and organizations. Many school districts across America also have thrown off their outdated policies against allowing district officials access to social networking sites and have embraced Facebook as a tool for both pushing information to the public and engaging the community in a conversation.

However, the Wake County schools organization had no official presence on Facebook at the time of this review.

By comparison, the Wake County government has an active Facebook presence, with about 1,500 "fans" of its Facebook page as of March 1, 2011 (See excerpt below).



WAKE COUNTY NORTH CAROLINA

Wake County Government
www.wakegov.com

A great place to live, work, play and learn!

WakeGOV.com
STAY CONNECTED

Connecting you to Wake County Government!

Wall
Info
Photos
Events
Video

1,483 people like this



Wake County Government Like

Government Organization · Raleigh, NC

Wall

Wake County Government
Join Wake County to celebrate National Nutrition Month in March by donating non-perishable food items to help local food banks and the people they serve. Follow the link for donation locations.

WakeGOV.com - FEATURE: Wake Celebrates National Nutrition Month
Wake County is celebrating National Nutrition Month® throughout March by conducting food drives at several County buildings. Beginning Tuesday, March 1, through Thursday, March 31, 2011, residents can drop off non-perishable food items at the following locations:

18 hours ago · Share
3 people like this.

Wake County Government
There's so much you can learn at Wake County Library events in March, you'll think you can beat the robot on Jeopardy!

WakeGOV.com - FEATURE: Tigers, Job Search Assistance and Food Safety at Wake County Libraries
Events at Wake County Libraries in March

February 25 at 2:09pm · Share

Wake County Government
Wake Health Officials Issue Rabies Notice for Residents Near Ravens Ridge Subdivision

WakeGOV.com - NEWS: Wake Health Officials Issue Rabies Notice for Residents Near Ravens Ridge

An official explained that the school district is still *"fairly new"* to social networking. The district has moved quickly to establish a presence on Twitter and YouTube but not on Facebook.

While the Wake County school system does not have an official presence on the world's largest social networking site, community members and other observers of the school district are busy pushing information out through Facebook about the Wake County schools. This Facebook link was posted by a parent group in Houston, Texas that has been observing the activity in Wake County:



Hisd Parent Visionaries

We assign students based on the address of the parent. There are a lot of other variables," Beavers explained. "But sometimes you've just got to do it because you've got to do it. It's best for the child." More than 3,000 new students are expected to enter school this year.



Wake schools toss out zone assignment plan - Wake County - NewsObserver.com www.newsobserver.com

In a surprise reversal, the **Wake County** school board threw out its controversial, 16-zone student assignment plan Tuesday night on a motion by vice chairwoman Debra Goldman, who spent much of the meeting complaining about being shut out of the development of the plan.

18 hours ago · Like · Comment · Share

Some interviewed said WCPSS's aversion to Facebook is part of an overall level of discomfort with the idea of directly engaging with the public. *"There is a general administration-wide opposition to engaging the public directly. ... We're afraid people are going to say something bad about us that we don't agree with. There's a worry about giving a platform to opponents,"* a district official said. Another noted: *"We need to get over the fear of technology and interacting with the public."* A top district executive echoed concern about using Facebook. *"There has been some concern about the potential abuse of it,"* the executive said. *"We have had a few cases where personal Facebook posts have gotten (employees) into hot water. We have in our employee*

handbook guidelines for what they should do if they are going to be talking about work related (issues on Facebook.)”

A board member agreed that the district needs a more active presence on blogs and other websites and media and suggested the responsibility rests with the Communications Department. *“The PR department should be out there countering (opposition). They’ve never once answered anything on a blog. They don’t do it.”*

The Wake County District has no formal policy or set of procedures to govern internal communications.

The Wake County School District’s 18,000 employees should be the district’s best ambassadors for information to the public. But to do well as ambassadors for the school district, employees must be well informed.

While the district produces an electronic monthly newsletter for employees (*Education Matters*), the district has no policy or set of written or otherwise formalized protocols for communicating to all employees information about important deliberations and decisions by the leadership team. More often than not, internal communication at the school district happens on a hit-and-miss basis because there is no protocol guidance, and no specific guidance from the district leadership, for internal communication.

“It’s informal at best,” a district executive said of internal communication at WCPSS. *“Internal communication has been a casual byproduct. ... I think there are opportunities to reach out better.”* Another district executive familiar with the internal communications efforts acknowledged there is often confusion on responsibilities for internal communication, and often the message doesn’t get out in time. *“I spend a lot of time combing web sites trying to find things going on. Sometimes things will happen (related to school security) and we’ll read it in the paper before I even know it. ... (The district must decide) who does it come from? Does it come from Communications or (from another office)? If something happens, it can be slow in getting to us (other executives) from the Communications Department. There is a lack of a formal process. Who will make sure security gets it? Who will make sure the superintendent gets it and the chief of staff gets it? Sometimes we spend energy”* (but don’t succeed in internal communications), the executive said. One top executive who works closely

with schools said of internal communications *"Sometimes we find out in the elevator what's going on."*

Officials said the district has an employee newsletter that goes to all 18,000 employees, but there was no data regarding how well received the internal newsletter is, or whether it is succeeding in driving information to employees. One teacher said bluntly *"I don't take the time to even open (the electronic employee newsletter)."*

Not only does the district not have a formal set of internal communications protocols, various district departments produce their own internal communications newsletters for employees. These individual department newsletters can contain widely varying messages, and they are not centrally controlled or reviewed by the communications department. One communications department official reported running into a roadblock while trying to get information from a department for a district-wide newsletter. *"I got told by one department 'we're doing our own newsletter', and they wouldn't share the information."*

Comments obtained in some of the interviews suggested that the leadership at Wake County needs to make a commitment to the importance of good internal communications. One picture that emerged from some of the interviews was of an organization that sometimes is unwilling to share information among departments.

"There's a big feeling of being out of the loop," one district official said. Another noted: *"There's a fair amount of 'silozation' still in the organization. It's hard to get people to reach out ... Groups are very easy to have their own turf and feel like they need to defend it."*

"I've been trying to get information about (an issue), but when you ask for the information, you don't get responses and they say 'we're not at a point yet where we're ready to share that information,' " a district official said.

District officials indicated past surveys regarding the utility of the newsletters showed employees wanted more information about what was going on at the district and fewer personal profiles in the newsletters. *"They didn't care about anniversaries but wanted real information on what was going on and how to do my job well,"* a district official said of the results of the surveys about newsletter readership.

The district fails to use a very powerful internal communications tool that already is part of the district infrastructure. District officials virtually unanimously agreed the district never uses its automated phone messaging systems to push out information to employees. Even though the Alert Now or School Messenger systems could be used to reach thousands of employees quickly with important information, the district doesn't regularly use the tools for internal communication.

The lack of internal communications planning leads to criticism from some board members. *"Teachers get (information about district decisions and initiatives) from the press,"* a board member said. Asked if the district has an internal communications policy, the board members said *"I don't remember ever reading a communications policy."* Another board member's comments reflected on how the lack of internal communications planning negatively impacts the board. *"Communicating with faculty and staff is an issue. Someone says something to a principal who then tells a supervisor who then tells a team, and then it's said 'who said we had to this?' and the answer is 'it's the school board.' The fall back position whenever they have to do something is 'the school board said we have to do it,'"* the board member said. *"There is a lot of miscommunication and missed communication (opportunities) internally."*

Some teachers confirmed a substantial problem with internal communications at the district. *"I get it (information) from the news. I read it in the paper,"* one teacher said. While some teachers said their principals do a great job of keeping them informed, others said the system still doesn't work very well. *"I don't always feel like I find out (information I need to know),"* a teacher said.

School principals confirmed the absence of formal protocols or a process for internal communications in Wake County, and some said the issue affects performance, noting that principals often get *"blind-sided"* by decisions.

School principal comments on internal communications issue

- *"There are pros and cons. Some departments, like HR (Human Resources), do a really good job communicating. ... But sometimes its information overload. It would be nice if we had something like an update that had critically important things that needed to be noted."*
- *"No, not all departments are as good (at internal communications)."*
- *"I have found that although the high school directors have monthly meetings with principals, sometimes there are sub-decisions that are made ... that I feel don't get communicated to us during the decision making process."*
- *"I hear about (decisions) from a teacher who heard it at a meeting. We're blind-sided."*
- *"For me it's been a follow-through thing, having to send the same information multiple times."*
- *"They kept me in the loop."*
- *"I never know what's going on with maintenance, the status of (a project), and I don't know who to contact."*
- *"My frustration with HR is communication between HR and payroll. It seems like the procedures are constantly changing, and I can't keep up with it."*
- *"Yes, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing (on the HR and payroll issue)."*
- *"Questions (from principals to central office staff) get bounced around a lot between departments. I emailed a salary question. Not only did it not get answered, it got split up and sent to different departments. One half I heard back from, the other I didn't hear anything. When I email, I want the answer."*
- *"Some departments communicate well and others don't. For me it's massive to get things from so many different places. If there was some kind of system or place where everything is communicated, one place, so I don't have to ... look for it. I have to go to so many different places to get information."*

Principals said they sometimes learn about important district decisions through the news media. *"If the board meets on Tuesday night and makes a student assignment decision, central office hasn't had time to let us know before it hits the paper,"* a principals said.

District executives readily acknowledge Wake County's shortcomings in internal communications. *"There is no policy. Every department does it (internal communications) on its own."* The executive said he has weekly strategy meetings with his department leaders to pass along internal information, but when asked if other departments do the same thing, the executive replied *"I don't know."* A district executive acknowledged that employees get *"very little"* information about important decisions and plans of the district leadership. *"It depends on the division (of central office that is communicating). Some are very good about pushing out information."*

The lack of a well-defined flow of internal communications affects even the Communications Department employees whose jobs revolve around communicating about what district officials are doing. Some Communications Department staff acknowledged sometimes learning about important district information through the media. *"We are sorely lacking in a coherent internal communications strategy or plan, much less a policy,"* a Communications Department staff member said. *"There's been no serious push from the top for effective communications strategy."* Another communications department official said *"We desperately need (an internal communications policy). Typically (information internally) trickles down. ... It's easy to take for granted that something has been communicated and it has not,"* said a communications department official who acknowledged not always knowing *"what decisions have been made at a board meeting."*

Some interviewed said the only times Wake County has made a robust internal communications effort have been in conjunction with bond campaigns for school construction. *"As soon as the bond campaign ends, all that (internal communications) infrastructure goes away,"* a district official said.

The plethora of newsletters can confuse the public and create mixed messages internally.

With newsletters produced by a variety of central offices and no central oversight of the messages, and with a series of newsletters aimed at the public being produced monthly, Wake County could be confusing its public and its employees with a barrage of information that likely is not coordinated in its messaging.

The electronic monthly employee newsletter takes the place of a previous print version that feedback indicated was “wasting money”, a district official said. The district has not yet conducted a reader survey to determine whether the new electronic newsletter for employees is reaching its audience with the desired messages. There was no indication in the interviews conducted for this audit that the district has yet reviewed which employees are at least opening the electronic newsletter when it arrives on their computers.

Despite Wake County’s volume of newsletters, its robust surveying capabilities, its two phone message systems and the district website, parents interviewed agreed they do not get enough important information directly from the school district. Parents said they want to hear about important matters directly from the leadership of the school district and not just through the media.

“I have to go looking for it (important information) sometimes,” a parent said. “I’d appreciate getting directly to me ... the nuts and bolts of what we need to know and do, what’s happening. I need to get that from the district, not from the newspaper or TV or me searching the website. I have to believe there’s a way to do that with all this technology.” Another parent agreed. *“There needs to be direct information and factual, and it does need to be often. I want it to be factual and come from the district if it’s district information and from my school if it’s school information. I don’t want the news to get it before I get it.”*

A top district executive said the varying electronic communications can be confusing for schools and deliver mixed messages. *“Sometimes you can reach a point of saturation. There needs to be a single source of information for people. They aren’t going to read three newsletters,”* the district executive said. *“There are many different messages. We’ve got to help identify what is most important. We’re not doing a good job of that. We’re putting too much on them (employees who receive internal communications).”*

The public website design is not as modern as that of many organizations, and some of its sections don't always work; users complain the website is not easy to navigate.

Officials report the district's main website was visited an average of 500,000 times per week in 2010. The Morning Announcements section of the website is a blog that shares information about school events. District officials reported particular success with a strong effort, led by the Communications Department, to use the website to solicit recommendations from the public regarding the school district's budget. *"In December we put up an online public suggestion box for the budget. We told them (the Communications Department) what we wanted, and they put it out there. ... They are very proactive,"* a district executive said.

But district officials acknowledge that the website needs improvement. *"We are revamping the website. ... Our website is organized for our convenience (not for the public's convenience),"* a top executive said. *"We're trying to repackage it to be more audience centric."*

The district's ParentVision podcasts are generally praised by the staff. However, a check of the district's website on February 28, 2011 revealed that the link to the ParentVision podcasts under the heading "RSS Feeds" on the left side of the home page was broken, and the podcasts were not accessible. The link remained broken throughout most of the production of this report, although the link was working again by the time the report was finished. District officials reported the podcasts were downloaded nearly half a million times in 2010.

Some district officials interviewed said they believe the district's website does a good job of providing information to the public. *"There's a good utilization of the website (by the public),"* a district executive said. Others expressed concern that the website doesn't deliver enough important information to the public and that, on the related issue of direct communication with the public, the district isn't reaching all its audiences. *"We have the website and videos,"* a district executive said. *"But everyone is not getting the information in the community. We're assuming people will go to the website or read one email. A single strategy won't get the outcome we want."*

Some board members also weren't sold on the adequacy of the website.

"Our website is cumbersome, difficult to maneuver. I can never find what I need to as a board member on our website," a board member said. Another board member agreed. (The district website is) *terrible. It hasn't changed (in many years). There's a lot of information, but it's not very family friendly. It's not something you'd want to sit down and look at."*

District officials reported that surveys generally are conducted annually to get feedback on the public regarding the main district website, but that no such surveys are conducted regarding public opinion about the individual school websites.

Parents interviewed expressed mostly negative feelings about the district website. *"The website is not the easiest to navigate,"* one parent said. Another agreed. *"The navigation doesn't make sense. What you think you're looking for is not what they call it. ... It would be nice if we had something that made sense. It seems to be internal language (used as navigational tools on the website),"* a parent said.

But some of the interviews suggested that district leadership is not in synch with the feelings of some parents who expressed negative views of the website. *"Those who access it (the district's website) really like it. They can find everything they want on our website. Parents tell each other to make sure to read the website, and they share things they glean from the website,"* a district executive said.

The district's main web page is *"designed for the employees,"* not for ease of public use, a parent said. *"As a parent you have to click the parent button, which does not stick out. I have to remind myself to go to the parent button,"* another parent said. Parents complained there is too much information on the website to sort through, and that the search function doesn't work well.

School principals also were critical of the website. *"The intranet ought to be the place (for principals to collect important information), but there are barriers to getting things posted on the intranet for us. I don't know why that is,"* a principal said. Another said the search function on the district's website is *"horrible."* *"When I do searches I get random things that don't connect to what I want,"* another principal said.

Communication is hampered by the organizational structure which places control of the district's public website under the Communications Department but control of the intranet site for employees under the technology department.

District officials reported one significant organization structural problem that can hamper both effective internal and external communication; control of the district website. Officials said the public face of the district's website is managed by the Communications Department, but the intranet site, which contains information for use only by school district employees, is managed by the Technology Services Division. Having the two sections of the website managed by two different departments creates an unnecessary organizational barrier to good communications.

The lack of operational control of the website by one department can lead to inconsistency on the website. For example, the Communications Department uses the <http://www.wcps.net/gotnews/> web link to collect information for news stories produced by the district. But Communications Department staff said an effort to place a similar information gathering point on the intranet site for employees failed because the Technology Services Division will *"just say no."*

There reportedly is little communication between the departments that manage the public part of the website and the intranet site for employees. *"We don't sit down and plan with them what goes on the intranet,"* a Communications Department official said.

Valuable Communications Department resources are tied up responding to every request made under public information laws.

Because much of the work that comprises a response to a request for information under state open records laws involves researching, finding and redacting documents, such public information act requests can consume many valuable hours of staff time. Much of this work can be completed by administrative support staff, but at Wake County, all such open records act requests are handled by the communications professionals in the Communications Department.

Rather than assigning clerical or administrative support staff to search, compile and edit documents in response to such requests, the Wake County school district has assigned the professional communications staff to do the work. District officials reported that some requests for information could result in the compilation of 1,500 or more pages of documents. *"The other day, we had to go through all the legal bills and redact names out of the bills. There were 14 stacks of documents, and they took an hour per stack, so it took 14 hours of staff time just to redact the documents,"* a Communications Department official said.

The Chief Communications Officer and the Communications Director *"handle most"* of the public information requests, officials said. Department officials could not estimate the number of hours set aside by top district communications officials to deal directly with the open records requests, but anecdotal evidence would suggest it is substantial.

A district executive said a reorganization of some of the Communications Department's responsibilities and elimination of some duplication could help. *"I don't think they need more staffing. Probably there are some things they could do, communications that could be condensed."*

Some district surveys receive varying levels of responses, the results of some surveys are not always widely communicated to employees and the community, and the district does not usually conduct surveys to determine school leadership satisfaction with central office support.

Although the district has a very robust public and employee opinion survey operation and makes an admirable effort to generate survey results to inform and help guide the decision-making process at the district level, there are aspects of the survey operation that could be improved.

Wake County's survey capabilities are among the most robust I have seen anywhere in the country among school districts. The district conducted a vigorous survey of parent preferences regarding school calendars in 2010, and details of the results of the survey, with more than 40,000 respondents, were made widely available at a board meeting and on the district website. Wake County also participates in the statewide survey of teacher working conditions and conducts an annual Professional Learning Team survey. In addition, the Evaluation and Research Department also conducts "on

demand” surveys of parents for principals, and provides a teacher survey of new principals that is conducted by area superintendents.

Despite its strong capabilities for conducting surveys, however, Wake County does not appear to survey often the community about attitudes regarding the school district, schools and performance. Interviews also showed the district does not routinely rev up its survey engines to learn more about employee attitudes or level of understanding of district decisions and initiatives, and does not regularly survey principals to determine their satisfaction with the customer support provided to schools by the central office, except for surveys about central office support of the Professional Learning Teams initiative.

“I don’t know if we do it regularly,” a district executive responded when asked if the school district surveys the community on its thoughts about schools and the district. The same executive said the district also does not routinely survey employees. Asked if the district surveys principals to determine their level of customer satisfaction with the services provided by central office, a district executive said *“survey is too grand a word. At principal meetings, principals are asked to fill out evaluation cards (on whether there) is anyone at the central office doing a good job and areas where it hasn’t been so good.”* The executive said the feedback cards are tallied and reported to the leadership team. *“It’s not as grand as a survey. We engage in surveys if there is a particular problem about which we are seeking information,”* a district executive said.

Despite the district’s robust capabilities for survey work, a district executive said the job still isn’t getting done. *“I don’t think we do a good enough job surveying around instructional needs or the general community view of the district,”* the executive said.

School principals interviewed confirmed there are no regular district-wide surveys of principals’ views on the customer service provided by the central office. *“From a specific department, yes (there are occasionally surveys), but not district wide,”* a principal said.

A closer look at one report, the results of the 2010 statewide survey on teacher working conditions, showed that while a strong 91 percent of teachers district wide responded to the survey, the level of response varied greatly by school. The survey response rate varied from a low of 57.5

percent at one school to 100 percent at a number of schools. Fifty Wake County Public School District schools in 2010 recorded response rates lower than the statewide average of 88.8 percent.

A district executive said the school district does "*a moderately aggressive campaign*" to promote participation by teachers in the survey, and while acknowledging the participation rates vary from "*school to school*", the district executive said school principals "*take those results fairly seriously.*"

School principals interviewed said the results are taken seriously at the school level, but there is little or no district-wide use of the results to affect policy or public discourse. "*We share them (the results of the teacher climate survey) with the staff. ... We're able to compare it with system results and state results and look at our areas of strength and weakness and develop action plans to improve on areas we focus on,*" a principal explained.

Except for some concern about the survey being a single snapshot in time with results that could depend on how the teacher felt that day, principals generally supported the teacher climate survey as a useful tool. But asked if the results are ever used district wide to help develop policies that affect teacher climate, the principals agreed the results are not used in that way.

Wake County teachers interviewed expressed frustration that their opinions are not more regularly sought out. Some teachers confirmed taking part in the state survey of working conditions, but others said the district does little else to seek teachers' opinions through surveys.

One teacher said opportunities to respond to surveys from the district are "*rare*", and another said "*I'd feel concerned about responding.*" Another teacher reported wanting to be asked more often for an opinion. "*There are some things they could ask us about,*" the teacher said.

- "*We need to be asked. We are not asked diddly squat.*" – Wake County teacher.
- "*We're not accustomed to being asked how to help.*" – Wake County teacher.
- "*I don't think (asking for teacher input) is part of the process. (Leadership doesn't say) 'We're going to make a decision. Let's see what our teachers think.'*" – Wake County teacher.
- "*So much is top down, and we're just being put upon.*" – Wake County teacher.

- *"We work with children every day. Why should we feel like we're at the bottom of the totem pole?" – Wake County teacher.*

A district executive explained that Wake County surveyed parents more often in the past but scaled back that process several years ago because the district was seeing little or no movement in the parent survey numbers and, therefore, concluded the surveys were not achieving the desired results.

The district does annually survey fourth, seventh and tenth grade students and their parents, but stopped doing annual surveys of all parents when *"we found parent surveys weren't moving – we weren't seeing any change,"* a district executive explained. *"The results were the same every year. We weren't getting any information from the surveys that was helpful."* The survey process was described as *"a very expensive operation"* using *"paper and pencil"* surveys to try to reach parents. The district didn't use online surveys to reach parents because online surveys *"systematically leave out parts of the population."*

The survey of fourth, seventh and tenth graders and their parents is *"supposed to be a customer satisfaction survey,"* but a district executive didn't remember the district leadership team *"ever sitting down and discussing the results. ... We never have emphasized those results."*

Parents were mixed in their opinions of the work that Wake County does to survey parents and the community. Parents confirmed they took part in the survey regarding the school calendar, and one parent noted responding to a survey about magnet programs. But another said the district's surveys *"seem not to be uniform."* One parent said the district *"asks for an opinion and then they disregard it."* Another refused to take part in a survey because, the parent felt, the survey wasn't valid.

Parents are concerned about the quality of customer service provided to parents at schools.

Among the most important communications that take place in any school district every day are the interactions between parents and school employees. Parents want to be welcomed at schools and treated with respect as they try to help their children succeed at school.

Parents interviewed were almost unanimous in their belief that the quality of their interactions with Wake County schools varies widely, and most expressed some level of concern.

Comments from Wake County parents about their reception and treatment at schools

- *"It changes. In elementary school, they (school staff) couldn't get the door open fast enough for me to get in. At middle school it was the same. At high school, not so much."*
- *"It's 'take a number.' "*
- *"The receptionist will barely acknowledge my existence at the high school. For that reason I have not been involved in high school."*
- *"(An) elementary principal was known as horrid and difficult, and that parents were not welcome. The middle school was very welcoming."*
- *"When my kid started, it was very welcoming. I pulled back a little and they were less friendly."*
- *"My husband complains about it all the time. He can't believe they (the district) allow that kind of service."*
- *"The key is to have the first point of contact to be very welcoming. There needs to be some kind of customer service training for them."*
- *"Customer service should be at a higher quality. That should be at the top. There needs to be some kind of training for customer service."*
- *"There needs to be a sensitivity that I'm welcome there."*

Key Recommendations

The district should significantly ramp up its efforts to inform and encourage news media coverage of major decisions and initiatives of the district and be more proactive in creating more news-story style news announcements to help support the media's coverage, particularly of significant issues, thereby also improving opportunities to non parent community members to receive information about the district

The district generates many news releases. However, the district isn't making enough of an effort to aggressively generate public and news media interest in major, district-wide initiatives and decisions and isn't making sure enough of its news announcements are in news-story style to help inform and encourage media coverage.

The district is hurt by the low expectations of too many district leaders who believe that it isn't possible to generate as much or more positive news coverage of the district as the district receives in negative coverage. Those expectations are there, in part, because the district is not aggressive enough in making sure news organizations that do want interesting, important news on positive initiatives of the district get that news.

Wake County's solid, professional communication staff needs training in how to create better news announcements that help the news media with more interesting, news-story style information and make it easier for the large media base in Raleigh to cover news about the school district. The superintendent should require such training of the staff and then periodically have the news products generated by the communications staff after the training reviewed for improvement. The superintendent should expect to very quickly see a marked improvement in the quality of the news announcements made by the Communications Department.

With this training in improving the news announcements, the superintendent also should set the expectation that news worthy of the media's consideration will be reported by the district in a much more timely fashion. There should be no more announcements that important news happened "recently". The new style news releases should not only be timely but should be developed as complete news stories to help make it easier for the media to cover the announcements, with quotes from district leaders and common language replacing "education-ease" and an explanation of major issues imbedded in the news releases, just as a reader would expect to see in a regular news story.

With a new superintendent working with a very involved board to chart a new course for the district, the Communications Department should take every opportunity to present to the media major stories about the critically important work of the new leadership team at Wake County. Now that the new leadership team is in place, the Communications Department needs to

break free of the extreme caution that has helped limit its activities over the past year and become much more aggressive about telling the district's big-picture story.

The new superintendent should require communications planning, and then execution of that planning, in advance of all significant upcoming news opportunities, including budget adoptions, curriculum decisions, decisions regarding safety and security of children and schools, and efficient and effective management of the district.

Creating more opportunities to communicate information about the district through the news media could help with one problem district officials acknowledge; the district's communication with non parents is constrained. A district executive said there is a "*big gap*" in reaching out to the "*general public*", 70 percent of whom do not have children in the district. In the past, the district paid for newspaper advertising inserts to reach a broader audience. Improving the amount and quality of the news coverage could help the district reach a larger audience in the county.

The district should begin aggressively promoting the important work of the school board, with news announcements in the days leading up to the board meetings about important action pending, and quick reports to the media and the public after board meetings

The district's failure to generate news announcements about the important work of the school board to inform and encourage media coverage and public understanding before and after school board meetings is a significant lost opportunity.

Virtually every school board agenda has important items up for consideration that would make excellent news stories. The Communications Department should immediately move to secure information about school board meeting agenda items as those items are being developed by district administrators and should plan to issue several news announcements about individual school board agenda items in the days leading up to each board meeting. The superintendent should make it clear to central department leaders that he expects full cooperation in providing information to the Communications Department about board meeting agenda items in development.

These news announcements also should be developed in strong news-story style designed to inform and encourage media coverage of the important upcoming news.

Immediately after each board meeting, the Communications Department should issue a report to the media, through its electronic communications channels and to employees about the decisions of the school board on those important items highlighted in advance of the meeting. The superintendent should set the expectation that reports about school board decisions will be issued immediately, and that reports issued days after the board meeting are not acceptable.

Board members have a right to expect the Communications Department to work to help the public understand the board's work and its importance to the academic development of students.

The superintendent should work with the board leadership to help encourage civil public discourse by board members as a way of helping the public to better understand the board's work and to be more actively involved.

The school district should be very concerned about the widespread reports that the sometimes harshly worded disagreements between board members at school board meetings and in other arenas, such as social networking, are negatively affecting the district's image and the morale of employees and community members. Because of the nature of the news business, a good potential news story about positive action taken by the school board can be overshadowed by severely negative coverage if disagreements between board members dissolve into name calling and personal and political accusations.

Several board members said they understood the tone of some of the disagreements is off putting to the public and a source of negative news coverage of the district at a time when positive work is being done. The superintendent and the leadership of the board should work with board members to make a concerted effort to tone down inflammatory rhetoric at the board meetings and, when disagreements do arise, to deal with those disagreements in a courteous and professional way that better communicates to the public the reasons for board member decisions and

helps encourage more consideration by the news media of the important positive work the board is doing.

The school district should contract with a broadcast news monitoring service to begin tracking and sharing with the public, board members, district executives and employees its news coverage on commercial television and radio stations, in addition to the print news tracking already in place

The district should make an agreement with a news monitoring service that lets the district receive daily reports on the broadcast coverage, along with web links to that coverage that can be shared with the school district's internal and external audiences.

Combining the broadcast coverage reports with the print coverage reports and sharing the stories with the community and with employees and staff will help improve the public and internal understanding of the significant initiatives and developments at the school district.

Require development of more uniform standards of usage of the district's phone messaging systems, and require regular reports to district leadership on the usage of the system and monitoring of the system by the Communications Department for information for development of news stories and information for the public; consolidate the electronic newsletters now being used to provide information to the community

Usage of the phone message system to deliver important information from schools to the public seems to vary widely from campus to campus. All parents have a right to regular communication from school leaders about their children and important developments at schools. The district should work with the phone message system provider to develop uniform standards of usage and should expect school leaders to be in regular contact with parents about issues, activities and developments at school.

Parents interviewed for this report said repeatedly they want more information about schools and the district, not less. The superintendent should set the expectation that school leaders will regularly use the phone message system and other communications vehicles to keep parents

informed. Schools also should begin using the survey capabilities of the phone messaging system to get feedback from parents on school issues.

The superintendent should require the central administration to begin regularly making district-wide phone calls with the message system to keep parents informed of important developments that affect schools throughout the system. The superintendent should periodically use the system to directly inform parents about major district issues.

The Communications Department also should promote with its ParentVision videos the use of the automated notification systems as part of the district's effort to inform and engage the community.

The district currently uses at least three different electronic newsletters to communicate with parents and the community -- *Parent Matters*, *Classroom Connection* and *School Community News*. The Communications Department should be charged with reviewing the three newsletters for opportunities for consolidation to improve the clarity of the communications flow to the public and to save district manpower and financial resources used to produce the publications.

Improve the quality of the audio in the ParentVision videos

As part of the overall effort to better communicate with and engage the community, the district should review the audio quality of the ParentVision videos and reproduce any videos now on the website that have poor sound quality. The videos are widely praised for their important information, but poor sound quality undercuts the effectiveness of some of them. The district should make sure interviewees are appropriately wired for sound before future videos are produced.

The Communications Department also should review all website links to ParentVision broadcasts to ensure they are fully functioning.

Begin using Facebook as a communications tool for the district

The time for fear of internet giant Facebook is over. The district needs to quickly embrace the communications opportunities presented by Facebook, as it has with Twitter and You Tube, and begin using Facebook to communicate more aggressively with the public, as other school districts and government organizations in and around Wake County have done.

The district should establish any additional policies needed to make sure district employees don't use work time for personal social networking, but should remove the district blockage of Facebook and begin strategically using the communications tool for engagement with the community. An official Wake County Public School System Facebook page should be launched, and top district officials should consider their own Facebook pages linked to the district page to provide more in depth information on issues and to help the community get to know the school district leadership better.

Make a commitment to the importance of internal communication and establish new internal communications protocols and expectations for the success of such communications efforts; review the proliferation of internal communications publications and eliminate and consolidate them; begin using the phone message system for internal communications

WCPSS has a very significant internal communications problem. Solving that problem must begin with action by the top of the organization.

The superintendent should make a declaration that good internal communications – keeping employees informed and creating a dialogue with employees about important decisions, initiatives and issues under consideration – will be a top priority of the new administration. The superintendent should declare he will expect the administration to be vigorous in its efforts to keep employees fully informed and that school leaders will be expected to engage in the same kind of vigorous exchange of information with school staffs as well.

Next, the superintendent should direct the Communications Department to develop a set of written internal communications protocols that will describe how every central office department and every school will be expected to communicate information all the way through the organization. These new protocols should clearly provide a way for the district leadership to know that information about all decisions – including those of the school board -- initiatives, and discussions on the development of initiatives, where appropriate, are communicated the same way by district and school leaders to every employee.

To check on the progress of this effort, the district should direct regular surveys of employees to determine whether information is being communicated effectively internally, and to give employees an opportunity

to provide feedback and recommendations for further improvement of internal communications.

Wake County seems to have too many newsletters from too many different sources being sent to district employees. The Communications Department should immediately be charged with reviewing the variety of employee newsletters being generated across the district and recommending a way to consolidate those newsletters into one communications vehicle. Such a move would eliminate the inconsistent messaging being delivered to employees and would save the district work hours and other production costs. Part of the review and consolidation should involve surveying employees about the strengths and weaknesses and general effectiveness of existing employee communications products.

The superintendent also should direct that the district begin regularly using its existing automated phone messaging systems to keep employees informed immediately about important activities in the school district. The district wastes available resources when it does not use these powerful phone messaging systems for internal communications.

Redesign the website to improve its aesthetics and draw more attention to important information from the district and information sought regularly by the public and to improve its usability; place content control of both the public website and in the intranet site for employees under the Communications Department

The district should form a working committee of parents, teachers and administrators to give feedback for improvements needed in the website. A new survey should be commissioned to gain broader feedback from the community on the strengths and weaknesses of the district-wide website and also school websites. Then the district should commission outside expertise to work with the district's website managers to redesign the website to reflect the needs of the community.

One goal of the website redesign should be improvement of the site's search engine to help community members and employees more easily find information they seek.

Having the public website and the internal website controlled by two different departments leads to confusion and inconsistency. Control of the

intranet site's content should be shifted to the Communications Department, and the district should periodically survey employees to make sure the shift of the intranet site control results in an improved website.

Consider working with the news media to ask that media contacts to the district be first routed through the Communications Department to better serve the media and to allow district officials to more efficiently respond to media inquiries

While most contacts from the news media already go first to the Communications Department, interviews revealed that in some cases members of the media contact department heads and other employees directly for comment. At times, district officials contacted by the media will offer comments to the media and then inform the Communications Department about the discussion at a later time.

Because the top priority of school district employees is to serve the needs of children and their schools, a good practice is to work with the media to have all media requests be made first to the Communications Department. The Communications Department can then work efficiently with the appropriate district officials to respond to the media request while minimizing the interruption of school support services.

Consider reorganizing the Communications Department to place the community services operations under the leadership of a different department; remove from the Communications Department the responsibility for compiling documents in response to public information act requests and reassign those duties to a records management office

Among the large staff in the Communications Department is the community services office, which includes a director. District officials said the community services office has been under the direction of different departments over the years.

Because the community services office includes adult education and lifelong learning activities, it does not seem appropriate that the office be housed in the Communications Department. Moving the community services outside of the Communications Department also would let that department focus more

closely on communications services, without the need to manage the community services functions.

WCPSS's use of its top communications professionals to find and redact paperwork is a poor use of expensive time. The district should create an office of records management using existing administrative support-level employees to receive and process requests for documents made under the applicable public information acts. The Communications Department leadership should review the release of documents in cases in which substantial media interest may arise from the documents in order to prepare appropriate communications for district leadership and the media regarding those documents.

Consider an independent, expert review of the school district's internal and external surveys; redevelop and restart annual surveys of the community regarding school district initiatives and plans; more regularly survey all employees regarding their understanding of major district initiatives; regularly survey school principals about their satisfaction with central district office customer support for schools and publish the results of those surveys for public and internal review; improve participation rates in the teacher climate survey

The district needs to make better use of its significant internal capability for opinion surveying.

Despite the presence in the district of a number of employees described as experts on public opinion surveys, the district several years ago abandoned the wide surveying of the community on its thoughts about the school district and the schools because, officials said, useful information wasn't coming from the surveys. The district needs to restart those annual community surveys and seek outside, expert advice in polling, if necessary, to help craft survey instruments and conduct research that will provide useful results. The public's involvement in the public school district is too critical to the district's future success to simply not regularly find out what is on the minds of the community about its schools and its school district.

An outside, expert consultant in opinion surveys also could review all of WCPSS's survey efforts to help determine which could be consolidated and

eliminated and develop new surveys that could be launched to obtain more information.

The district needs to regularly survey employees regarding their understanding of important district initiatives and decisions, as part of the effort to make sure employees are well informed. In addition, the district should annually survey school principals regarding their satisfaction with the customer service provided to schools by the various central office departments. The results of those surveys should be published for review by the media and the public, and district leaders should use the results of all of the surveys to inform decision making and make necessary changes in district office service to employees and the quality of information being provided to employees.

While the district as a whole responds to the teacher climate survey at a slightly higher percentage rate than the state average, district leaders should be concerned that 50 WCPSS schools in 2010 were below average in their level of response to the teacher climate survey. The district makes only a “moderately aggressive” effort to promote participation in that survey, a district official said. The district should commit to a much more aggressive campaign to promote the survey so the district can learn what more of its teachers feel about the school climate and act on that information.

Provide customer service training to school staffs

District leaders also should be concerned that parents interviewed said customer service by some school staffs is poor. So much of the critically important interaction between the community and the school district takes place at schools every day, and the district should not simply hope those school staff members who are receiving and serving parents and community members who come to the school treat their visitors cordially and with respect.

Customer service training should be provided for all school staff members who regularly receive and help community visitors to campuses, and the district should periodically survey parents to determine if the level of customer service at schools is improving.