

Date: May 7, 2012

To: Grand Erie District School Board Staff, Parents, and Community Members

Re: **NSPRA Communication Audit Final Report**

On behalf of the Trustees and Executive Council, we are pleased to share with you the final report of the Communication Audit prepared by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for the Grand Erie District School Board.

As part of our Multi-Year Plan, we identified *Engagement* as an area of emphasis with students, parents, staff, and community listed as key audiences to reach. In order to develop strategies that will improve our current communication and engagement program at the Board, we needed baseline data to begin our conversation.

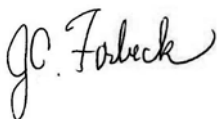
The final report of the Communication Audit outlines key observations, guiding principles, and recommendations that were based on the impressions and feedback gathered at the focus group sessions held in December, 2011. The recommendations presented in the report will be used to inform decisions, improve practices and develop action items in future annual operating plans.

Our effort to create higher levels of engagement does not rest with one department, but with everyone. We all must recognize the contributions we bring to the organization and reflect on our own ways that we communicate with one another. Improved communication leads to stronger relationships and these relationships will help us sustain a culture of engagement.

There is a lot of excitement about where this audit will take us and our past accomplishments position us well to move forward. Thank you to everyone who participated in the focus groups and for providing your valuable feedback.

We hope that you enjoy reading the audit and we welcome your comments at info@granderie.ca.

Yours in education,



John C. Forbeck
Director of Education

NSPRA's

Communication Audit Report

Prepared for the
Grand Erie District School Board
Brantford, Ontario

March 28, 2012



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Introduction

Goal of the communication audit

The Trustees of the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB) and Director of Education John Forbeck have worked collaboratively in the communities and schools to develop and clearly articulate a vision and goals for GEDSB as part of the Board’s Multi-Year Plan (2011-2015). The plan and the leadership’s commitment to it is a very good start in earning the participation and support of all school staff and the community in achieving the plan’s goals.

In addition to the GEDSB’s commitment to teaching and learning, it is committed to improving communication between the schools and the communities it serves. This audit was contracted for, approved, and supported by the board of trustees and Director. It clearly demonstrates that GEDSB recognizes the powerful role that effective communication plays in improving educational opportunities for students and in building support for schools.

The challenges of maintaining public confidence while dealing with enrolment fluctuations and dwindling resources, meeting the varying needs of a changing population across a large geographic area, reaching broad consensus on the educational program, and communicating effectively on emerging issues with all segments of the community affect not only the school system, but the province as well. As a major employer, the success of GEDSB and its students is critically linked to the success of the economic future of the area.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of parents, community members, and GEDSB employees, it was obvious to the auditors that the remnants of amalgamation now many years ago still surfaces when staff, parents, and other community leaders speak about “their” schools. Even with all the potential impact of the strategic plan much work has to be done to serve as a catalyst so more staff and

external groups see themselves as part of one unifying Grand Erie Board. However, the audit results — as you will see — also provide a broad, a healthy picture of a board of trustees, staff, parents, and communities that are committed to quality schools and student success. As is often the case, the more “they” get to know you, the better the understanding, and the stronger the support will be.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to assess current communication efforts and offer recommendations to improve the planning and management of public relations, consultation, marketing, and communication efforts with all GEDSB stakeholders.

You should view the findings and recommendations included in this report carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the communications department or any other department, they are intended to improve communication in a school board that is committed to reaching its goals and creating a service-driven system in which every child will learn.

It is difficult to measure communications effectiveness. However, you can assess individual elements. You can determine whether specific program goals and objectives have been met. The real measure of success for any program — including a public relations or communication program — is to determine whether it is helping the school system make progress toward its stated mission. Accordingly, in developing the recommendations, the auditors reviewed the perceptions of the focus groups and resource materials in light of GEDSB’s mission, vision, and goals.

Opinion research as a foundation

A communication audit provides an important foundation for developing a strategic communication plan for the school board. The audit informs GEDSB leaders about community attitudes and the effectiveness of current communication efforts, and offers recommendations to expand or enhance the communication program. The audit also provides a benchmark for measuring progress in the future. The development of any effective communication strategy begins with opinion research.

Scope and nature of the study

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a series of 19 focus groups representing a variety of GEDSB’s internal and external publics. Participants in the focus groups were invited by board administrators to represent a broad range of opinions and ideas.

The sessions were approximately 1 hour in length and were held December 5 and 6, 2011, with the following groups:

- Parents (2 groups)
- Secondary Principals
- Elementary Principals
- Managers and Supervisors

- Administrative Assistants, Central Office Secretaries, Accounting, Purchasing, IT, HR
- School secretaries – Elementary and Secondary
- Secondary Students
- Board of Trustees
- Para-professionals and Social Workers
- Custodian and Maintenance/Facilities staff
- Community Members, Seniors, Alumni
- Business, Faith, Post-Secondary, Municipal Leaders
- Vice Principals
- Occasional Teachers, LTO's, Guidance, Library, Consultants, Miscellaneous
- EA's, ECE's

Communication Survey of Principals

We completed a survey of GEDSB school principals and used the results to develop the recommendations of this report. The results of the survey were sent separately to GEDSB.

Processes and Procedures

A communication audit conducted by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) enables a school system to view its communications from an “outside” perspective. The consultants for this communication audit were:

- **Sylvia Link, APR, ABC**, NSPRA consultant. Link currently holds the communications and stakeholder relations position with the Ontario Ministry of Education — Early Learning Division
- **Richard Bagin, APR**, the executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)

Their vitae are included in the *Appendix* of this report.

The first step in an NSPRA communication audit occurs when the communications department submits samples of materials used to communicate (i.e., newsletters, brochures, reports, etc.) with various audiences. The auditors also review the board website and school websites. The auditors examined all of these materials and websites for effectiveness of message delivery, readability, visual appeal, and ease of use. In addition, the auditors reviewed demographic data, strategic plans, communication budget information, marketing materials, news clippings, etc.

The core of the audit is the onsite focus group component designed to listen to and gather perceptions from the board's internal and external audiences. Each focus group was guided through a similar set of discussion questions. This communication audit was designed to:

- Assess the effectiveness of GEDSB's current communications programming.
- Solicit and evaluate key facts, opinions, concerns, and perceptions of focus group participants representing various internal and external stakeholder groups important to the success of board communications.
- Suggest strategies and tactics for enhancing communication with key audiences and improving the management of public relations, marketing, communications, and public engagement activities for GEDSB.

After reviewing the materials and focus group perceptions, the auditors prepared the recommendations presented in this report. The recommendations focus on strategies that GEDSB can use to refocus its communication resources to deliver key messages and to improve its overall communication practices.

Guiding definition

Since 1935, NSPRA has worked with school systems, state, and national education organizations and agencies to advance the cause of education through responsible public relations, information and communication practices. In doing so, NSPRA uses the following definition as a foundation for all educational public relations programs:

Educational public relations is a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization.

Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities that earn public understanding and support.

Assumptions

We assumed that school boards undertake communication audits because they are committed to improving their public relations and communication programs. We also assumed that they wish to view the organization and its work through the perceptions of others, and that they would not enter into an audit unless they were comfortable in doing so.

However, you should observe some caution in understanding the nature of such a review. Whenever you elicit people's opinions about an institution and its work, respondents tend to dwell on perceived problem areas. This is natural and, indeed, is one of the objectives of an audit. Improvement is impossible unless you gather information about what may need to be changed.

It is important to note that perceptions are just that. **Whether or not they are accurate, they reflect beliefs that focus group participants hold and they provide strong indicators of the communication gaps that may exist.** Our recommendations are designed to address these gaps and assist GEDSB in its efforts to communicate more consistently and effectively.

Recommendations

In response to the key findings, this report contains recommendations for improving communication with GEDSB's internal and external stakeholders. The recommendations are based on proven strategies used in successful communication programs by similar school systems and other organizations around North America.

Supportive quotes

The auditors took notes in each of the focus group sessions. We assured participants that their comments would be anonymous and would not be directly attributed to them.

The focus group summaries, sent under separate cover, are a synopsis of what was said in each group. Some comments are direct quotes from participants, while others are paraphrased for clarity. Any direct quotes will appear inside quotation marks, without personal attribution.

Copies to participants

Focus group participants were extremely interested in sharing their thoughts and ideas in the sessions. They were also interested in finding out the results of the communication audit.

Because of their high level of interest and involvement, along with the importance of closing the communication loop to build trust and credibility, we recommend that you give each focus group participant a copy of the recommendations in this report for review and feedback.

Key Observations and Findings

The auditors identified several themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. These include the following:

- **Focus group participants consistently acknowledged that GEDSB's leadership and staff are known as caring educators who always strive to do what is best for the children of GEDSB.** They also consistently noted that GEDSB is a system in transition as the culture of GEDSB is still very slow in moving toward one system since amalgamation many years ago. As one trustee noted, "Three-way weddings rarely work." Others noted that GEDSB is perceived as "Brantford-centric." Steps need to be taken to unify the Board as one system for the entire community.
- **Other than top leadership, people know little about the Grand Erie Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015.** Staff and others need to find ways to connect with the plan as they want to know what it means to them and how the plan will influence their jobs. Parents want to see some tangible results based on the plan. Most focus group participants had little grasp of big picture directions but had no trouble talking about their day-to-day concerns. Right now they see the plan as more hype than substance, even though they noted that the plan represented good intentions. "Grand Erie is like a red Ferrari with bald tires — it looks good and has all the right elements, but can't get any traction." The Multi-Year Plan has not been communicated well yet. "We're not sure they have wheels on the car yet."
- **One of the weakest components of the overall communication effort is internal communication.** Inconsistency in messaging, delivery systems, and knowing "who does what," all adds up to a lack of credible information flowing through the system. Internal communication must be the lifeblood of efficient operations as well as the tool to turn all employees to ambassadors for GEDSB. One example that is working consistently is *The Blackboard* as it was praised in just about every focus group. Staff and others appreciated its timeliness, relevancy, and brevity.
- **There is a need to unify the internal culture of GEDSB, which is still fragmented due to amalgamation.** Fourteen years after amalgamation, Grand Erie's internal culture still remains fragmented—with strong allegiances to the former Norfolk and Haldimand school systems. Many staff feel that "things were better before amalgamation" and that "three-way marriages rarely work." The work to unify Grand Erie into one cohesive organization is not yet complete.

- **Other than *The Blackboard*, the most frequent sources of information for staff were other trusted colleagues, staff meetings, the grapevine followed by email and the website.** Staff noted that the cascading of information is inconsistent and two-way communication is missing as most meetings fall into the “sit and get” category of meetings.
- **Parents noted the school newsletters and some websites as their main sources of information, followed by other parents and newspapers.** Inconsistency in building communication efforts also was listed as a weakness.
- **When discussing a description of the entire Board, the most frequent responses included caring, top-down structure, Brantford-driven, silo approach, bureaucratic, fiscally responsible, good quality and dedicated teachers, and student-centered.**
- **People praised the work of the manager of communication as much progress has been made in the past two years.** In addition to *The Blackboard*, the Trustees, principals, and leadership team appreciated his counsel in media relations, issue alerts, and other matters his office provided.
- **The building of the Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015 created more face-to-face opportunities for Director John Forbeck with staff and parents, and those audiences appreciated those engagements.** They would like to see more face-to-face meetings with the Director and as well as hearing more from the superintendents and their areas of expertise.
- **HR communication efforts were praised and were simultaneously seen as needing improvement.** The HR poster that is visible in some buildings with a “who does what” description along with a photo helped staff to get answers to their questions. Training for new employees or employees who are promoted to other jobs during the year was reported to be lacking. An orientation session for employees is often seen as a basic for new employees and a critical component of any internal communication program in school and the private sector. It is needed in GEDSB.
- **The electronic communication effort for a system your size is basic, but needs much enhancement.** Email is overwhelming for some employees and the current protocol system must be improved. The website is clean and professional but it can do much more. And you need an Intranet or portal to assist in employee communication.
- **Communication with First Nations groups received a commendation for Director John Forbeck.** More communication and engagement has started but a continued and enhanced effort will produce even greater results. Communication with other agencies, and post-secondary institutions is working, but some improvement is needed. Again, some of these partners were not always sure who their contact was or how to reach that

person. More efforts to meet with them would help to solve this perceived problem. You need more communication on “big picture issues” for these groups.

- The role of the Board of Trustees in communication and visibility was also questioned by partner community groups. They were unaware of who served on the Board of Trustees and requested more engagement opportunities with the Board.
- **The visibility of sports programs, more inter-schools competition and other sports-centered communication concerns were expressed numerous times by focus group participants.**
- **Participants expressed the need for greater transparency as they lacked an understanding of why decisions are made.** They felt more communication was needed. The lack of directory information on key functions of the Board also added to the lack of transparency about GEDSB.
- **It appears to be time to review the purpose and function of the Communications and Engagement Committee including the Editorial Committee.** The committee was originally formed when there was no Communications department. Consideration should be given to the continued need for this committee. Certainly, the committee could be more helpful in advising the Communications Manager about overall strategic communication priorities, rather than focusing on the operational implementation of individual communication publications.
- **People expressed a concern about the need for more marketing to mitigate expected future enrolment decline in the system.** Targeting the kindergarten registration audiences and the transition audiences when students start considering their high school were two areas mentioned for increased marketing assistance. Marketing and communication are investments to bring in more enrolment —evidence shows that communication marketing can help attract more students.
- **People preferred getting information directly from their supervisors or principals or directly through the Board office.** Vehicles included e-newsletters or emails with links. The preference was in getting information directly from the Board or the schools and not depending on others to tell your story.
- Future communication challenges that were repeated in focus groups included:
 - Unifying the communities through the schools
 - Finding ways to overcome the email overload
 - Making it easier to find the content your audiences need

- Using technology as a communication tool in the schools and the community
- Increasing communication and relationships with partners
- Finding the time and resources for communication
- Making the schools the face of the community

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles for GEDSB communication efforts should include:

- **You must tie all communication efforts to GEDSB's Multi-Year Plan 2011-2105 and improve the everyday operational communications of the Board.**

To be effective, communication efforts must be driven by the mission and vision for GEDSB and be designed to support the teaching and learning components. The communication effort should focus on where teaching and learning take place — in the schools — and inform the public of progress toward GEDSB's goals. The communications staff should focus on proactively communicating successes and challenges and engaging stakeholders in educating students. A strategic communication plan will keep efforts focused and on track, ensure key messages reach target audiences, and maximize the value of GEDSB's communication dollar. In addition, a driving principle for improving everyday communication with staff, parents, and community members must take place. Easy-to-use and easy-to-find contact information for where staff and parents must go to find answers is a critical component of any Board. The annual improvement plan based on the Multi-Year Plan also requires a communication plan—to ensure that internal and external audiences understand how each board initiative/activities relates to the Multi-Year Plan and their role in supporting the plan.

- **Every item in the Annual Operating Plan are considered major GEDSB initiatives and require a communication plan or strategy of its own.** While a strategic communication plan is needed to coordinate the overall program, it is also important that individual communication plans be implemented for each major new initiative planned for GEDSB. If enrolment continues to decline, it is very appropriate to create a plan focusing on solutions to this problem. Individual plans should identify clear messages for various target audiences and develop the best strategies and vehicles for delivering those messages to keep stakeholders informed and engage them to action.

- **Strong, effective internal communication must be a priority.** No communication effort will be successful if employees do not become ambassadors for teaching, learning, student achievement and the schools. Employees, who are seen by others as credible insiders, have the ability to make or break the image of GEDSB and its schools. School board employees who are informed and involved take greater pride in their jobs and perform more effectively. Staff members who are negative, non-responsive or unable to provide appropriate answers to parent and community requests will quickly undermine any organized communication effort. Provide all staff — in the central office and in the schools — with the information, tools, and training needed to support them in their roles as GEDSB ambassadors. A communication effort that does not have a solid foundation of internal communication is built on quicksand.
- **Effective and accountable communication efforts should be strategic, planned, and supported by top leadership.** GEDSB has an effective leader and communicator in Director John Forbeck. The Director and trustees must also be strategic about communications. Organizations seeking to adapt to change in innovative ways find it occurs most quickly and effectively when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. This is especially important with a system’s internal audiences. Change, such as your Multi-Year Plan and the need to unify your communities, inevitably creates communication gaps that — if not filled with credible, accurate information — are likely to be filled by critics and speculation. So, it is critical for the communication efforts and the communications department to be an integral and ongoing part of the change process.
- **Strategic communication requires research and evaluation to be woven throughout the communications effort.** No plan will be successful without research and evaluation components. While this communication audit provides a starting point, you should conduct additional ongoing research, such as readership surveys for publications, user testing and analytics of websites, and communication assessments of special programs and events, to help track and evaluate specific communication tactics. In addition, you must regularly evaluate major areas of a strategic communication plan, such as internal communications. The research component of the plan should capture baseline data that you can use to mark progress in selected areas of the communications effort. Communication should be a component of the annual evaluations of board administrators as well.
- **Core messages should communicate the mission and vision and should position GEDSB as “our communities’ schools of choice.”** Every school system and its schools should be known for their core values. For GEDSB, that means communication should reflect the values of “compassion, cooperation, humility, inclusiveness, integrity, perseverance, respect and responsibility.” Emphasize core values to communicate about the schools and to reinforce GEDSB’s position as a student-centred organization that is dedicated to “engaging, supporting and inspiring all learners to achieve and succeed.”

- **The communication effort should include a strong focus on engaging all stakeholders to take action on behalf of students.** Design a strategic communication plan to seek action by parents, community members, business leaders, staff, and others to find ways to improve and support teaching, learning, and student achievement throughout GEDSB. This should be a collaborative effort that seeks out the resources and expertise of citizens and community organizations throughout GEDSB. It should involve a structured, ongoing process to engage the public, promote an open dialogue on educational issues and goals, and build recognition that citizens are active partners in helping students learn and achieve. When stakeholders are truly engaged, the schools become “their” schools, and they become members of an extended team working to support student success. Such engagement efforts’ will also reduce the “the post-amalgamation blues” still resonating with your schools and communities.

- **People programs beat paper and mass media when it comes to engaging audiences to action.** An effective public relations and communications program must be a planned, systematic effort based on two-way communication and relationship-building with stakeholders. You should use a variety of communication vehicles to connect with key audiences. At all levels, it is critical that communication be consistent and information be presented with clarity. Interpersonal, face-to-face connections made by credible, knowledgeable opinion leaders and spokespersons are much more effective in persuading people to action than any mass media campaigns. People see influential peers, such as respected staff, parents, and community leaders as credible sources of information about issues and education in the school board; they can play an important role in supplementing formal communication efforts.

- **Make school-level communication a major component of GEDSB’s communication effort.** Research in school communication shows that people usually see the local school community as a dependable gauge for public opinion on how well schools and boards are doing. Local schools are a natural hub for communication with parents and others and should become a central focus of any strategic communication plan. Weave planned public relations and communications throughout all GEDSB programs and initiatives to support the delivery of clear, consistent messages and to provide direct support to schools in their local communication activities.

- **Triggering events will keep the focus on teaching, learning, and student achievement and help unify your communities as one Board.** Your communication efforts should create or locate timely triggering events, such as the as a possible *Grand Erie’s Best Showcase*, where each school’s instructional and non-instructional program demonstrate the winning results of their programs. Every school must participate and use the showcase to demonstrate some of the work of the best teachers, students, counselors, food service staff, facilities personnel, etc. Events that showcase the best teaching and learning from each school or department can help raise the awareness level and generate interest in teaching, learning, and student achievement among GEDSB’s stakeholder groups.

- **Enhance technology use to support an efficient, timely and effective system of communication.** GEDSB should continue to investigate and evaluate ways to use e-information distribution systems to reach internal and external audiences quickly and efficiently. Many school systems are increasingly expanding the use of email, voice mail, websites, electronic surveys, e-newsletters, the intranet, and social media tools to promote two-way communication and ongoing relationships with internal and external audiences. Participants agreed that it is time to make long-term improvements in your e-systems.

Recommendations

In response to the findings from the communication audit, this report contains recommendations for enhancing and improving communication with GEDSB's internal and external stakeholders. Many recommendations address ways to become more strategic with the communications program to better support GEDSB's mission, vision, and goals.

Ultimately, successful school systems in today's rapidly changing world use effective communication as a foundation for achieving success for students. School boards seeking to implement change find it occurs most quickly and efficiently when strategic, planned communication is a key component of the change process. With effective communication, staff members better understand their value to GEDSB and community members understand how they can support the educational program in ways that ensure success for all students.

The recommendations in this report are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather are designed to serve as a road map for improving communication, engagement and marketing strategies, developing a comprehensive two-way communication program, and building staff and community support. Some recommendations are broad and general, while others are specific, giving you helpful insight for possible implementation. Some suggestions are short-term and simple, while others are long-term and far-reaching. The communication strategies suggested are those that NSPRA believes will help GEDSB improve and enhance existing efforts, maximize available resources, and take advantage of available technology.

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication needs, and it would be unrealistic to expect the communications department and schools to take on all of these recommendations at once, especially given the current size of the communications staff. Indeed these recommendations will appear to be overwhelming.

So we advise GEDSB leaders to carefully consider and prioritize which recommendations can be implemented immediately given the staff and resources available and which should be included in long-range plans.

NSPRA will be pleased to discuss those two to three recommendations that may be a higher priority based on our assessment of your projected needs.

Recommendation 1:

Develop a strategic communication plan based on the Multi-Year Plan.

There is a strong need for comprehensive, strategic communication plan to guide and measure communications systemically. This communication plan must be based on and provide support to Grand Erie's *Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015*.

The purpose of a strategic communication plan is to support Grand Erie's mission, vision, and goals and Multi-Year Plan by aligning key messages and communication activities with stated goals and strategic areas and building strong relationships with stakeholders. A well-designed plan will help keep the communication effort on track and maximize the value of Grand Erie's communication dollar, demonstrating accountability to the board of trustees and to internal and external stakeholders in the process. A good plan will also focus on engaging stakeholders as well as informing them, which is essential, since *engagement* is one of the three pillars of the Multi-Year Plan.

By tying the overall communication plan to Grand Erie's strategic goals, you will have a clear plan to help the school system accomplish its mission and realize its vision for student achievement. This can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the communications effort because all requests, projects, and programs are considered in terms of whether they support the strategic goals. It also provides a vehicle for reporting on progress and demonstrating accountability when evaluation criteria are built into the plan. In addition, an effective plan builds understanding and staff involvement in communication efforts by providing clear direction and a basis for telling Grand Erie's story in "one clear voice." A strategic communication plan is a key ingredient missing from Grand Erie's overall communication effort.

The plan should include the four-step public relations process of research, planning, communication, and evaluation and address the following questions for every major action or activity Grand Erie undertakes:

- Who needs to know?
- Why do they need to know it?
- When do they need to know it?
- How are we going to tell them?
- What do we want them to do with the information they receive?
- How will we track and measure the outcomes of our communication efforts?

Update the communication plan as needed, but significantly update it annually before the start of the new school year. Though it is approved by the Director and trustees at the beginning of each school year, you

should make it public internally and externally. Focus on strategic communication goals that reflect Grand Erie's top priorities and outline the communication strategies and activities that will be used to reach target audiences and deliver key messages that reinforce and document progress on Grand Erie's strategic goals. The strategic communication plan should take into account all significant stakeholder groups (i.e., teachers, support staff, parents, students, business, civic and faith community leaders, community members, news media, etc.), the information they need and want to know, and the communication vehicles that are best suited to reach each group. A well-defined plan keeps the program on track and ensures that major goals and objectives are not overlooked in the day-to-day communications that can overwhelm a system the size of Grand Erie.

Given Grand Erie's limited communications staff, evaluate new communication initiatives and requests for project support from schools and departments based on whether they relate to the communication plan's strategic goals and objectives. This will help keep communication priorities in focus so communications staff are spending their time on the work that is most important to Grand Erie. **Wherever possible, give priority to directly supporting schools**, since the communication audit shows that most parents, students, and members of the community base their impression of the Grand Erie school system on their experience with their local school.

Existing communication plans developed by the Manager of Communication are an excellent starting point for developing the overall strategic communication plan. Pay special attention to incorporating the following elements into the overall plan.

- **Develop an overall communication goal**, which describes the desired outcome, once communication is complete.
- **Include "SMART" objectives.** The strategic communication plan must include SMART (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Ambitious but attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) objectives for each goal. This will allow Grand Erie to determine whether a communication activity is successful, needs additional resources or should be eliminated. An example of a SMART objective:

By [date], 80% of administrators feel prepared to deal with media interviews about activities or issues at their school.
- If the objective states only to, "Hold media relations training sessions for administrators," it can only be evaluated in terms of "output" (whether the training was delivered), as opposed to "outcome" (whether the training achieved the desired result). Measurable objectives will increase the accountability to communication efforts. Results-oriented, or outcome-based, objectives will enable Grand Erie to demonstrate the return on investment of funds spent on communication.
- For primary audiences, **define each audience's demographic and psychographic characteristics, their attitudes, concerns and communication preferences.** You can draw

much psychographic information from this communication audit, as well as other existing audience research, such as climate surveys. This information will help determine communication strategies and tactics.

- **Key messages should be “sticky” – memorable and relevant to the audience.** Aim for a maximum of three key messages. One or two overall messages may be key, as well as audience-specific.
- **Focus communication strategies and tactics on outreach, engagement and dialogue more than simply on disseminating information.**
- **Evaluate outcomes as well as outputs.** After completing any major communication project or initiative, evaluate its success in terms of outcomes, as well as outputs. For example, printing and distributing the kindergarten registration materials is an output. An increase in kindergarten registrants due to increased marketing and communication is an outcome. Evaluation should also determine which communication vehicles and strategies worked well for each target audience and which could be improved in the future. This step is often overlooked, yet it is critical in demonstrating the impact of strategic communication in helping Grand Erie achieve the goals outlined in the Multi-Year Plan.

Develop a communication plan to support the Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement 2011-12.

In addition to the overall strategic plan which supports the Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015, each annual operating plan must have a communication plan that includes the following:

- Informs staff, students, parents and the community about the main activities/initiatives Grand Erie is undertaking in this academic year to achieve its goals;
- Demonstrates the connection between each activity/initiative and the Multi-Year Plan;
- Helps employees understand how their work contributes to achieving GEDSB's goals;
- Helps parents and the community understand the actions they can take to support Grand Erie;
- Reports on Grand Erie's progress to date in achieving its goals.
- The communication plan should address diversity/inclusion. Though not currently seen as a major issue for Grand Erie, diversity will continue to grow in the years ahead and the Board should proactively prepare. As well, it is essential to create a welcoming

environment for all students, staff, parents and community members. Grand Erie should continue to build on the positive work it has done with groups such as the First Nations and the Mennonite community.

- The Communication Manager has implemented an effective issues management protocol. However, in addition, **include in the strategic communication plan a proactive media relations component and an updated crisis communication plan/protocol:**

Develop a proactive media relations plan.

In addition to responding to media requests, a proactive media relations plan will help Grand Erie to:

- Achieve awareness of your programs and services, especially among community members who do not have children in schools and who have not regular, direct contact with the school system;
- Build your brand and reputation;
- Emphasize your key messages;
- Increase transparency about the school system's operations and decisions; and
- Provide accountability to the public about the board's progress in achieving its goals from the Multi-Year Plan.

Focus news releases on illustrating the board's goals and key messages through the activities of schools and accomplishments of students and staff.

Given the realities of shrinking news resources in media outlets, it is essential to provide media with ready-made materials they can easily use — such as b-roll video, photos, quotes, graphics. We recommend a social media news release format. Make this material available through a well-resourced newsroom on the Grand Erie website.

As well, develop the Grand Erie newsroom as a trusted, direct news source for parents and the community. As the influence of news media continues to shrink, Grand Erie should seek to be its own news disseminator. The aim should be to “break” stories in the website newsroom before they are published in the traditional media, so that parents and the community come to rely on the board as their main direct source of news. The ability for the community to *subscribe* to news releases and “breaking news” is essential. (*See Recommendation 3 for more details.*)

Update the crisis communication plan/protocol

The strategic plan should also contain a crisis communication plan. Though Grand Erie has a crisis response plan, the auditors did not see a formal crisis communication plan. Clearly, the Communication Manager responds effectively in crisis situations. However, the current crisis protocol is outdated and must be expanded.

In a crisis situation, **Grand Erie must be able to reach all key stakeholders within a 30- to 60- minute timeframe with critical information.** As Grand Erie looks to the future of its communication program and the infrastructure needed to support it, consider the following checklist:

- ✓ Do employees, parents, reporters, and community members turn to the Grand Erie website first for current news and information about the board and the schools?
- ✓ Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive board news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts and other communications?
- ✓ When news breaks, can you get information posted on the board website and board social media sites within minutes?
- ✓ Does Grand Erie have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?
- ✓ Do you have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, political, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and nonprofit organizations?
- ✓ Does the technology management system provide you with reports that show what groups and individuals the board has contacted through email and whether they access the information you are providing?

In addition to the communication infrastructure for getting information out to audiences in a crisis, the protocol should be to document the process so that, if the Communications Manager and those who normally deal with crisis communications are unavailable, Grand Erie could still communicate effectively.

Elements of the crisis communication plan should include the following:

- Scenarios of possible crisis situations, based on situations which have occurred previously in Grand Erie and in other school boards, especially difficult situations such as the suicide or homicide of a student or staff member, pandemic, racial tensions, etc.

- Templates, scripts and samples — such as staff meeting scripts, student announcements, parent letters;
- Standard tips from crisis response experts and grief counsellors for school staff and parents to help them deal with students’ reactions during traumatic situations; and
- Explicit, step-by-step protocols and guidelines to follow.

Make annual crisis communication training for senior leaders and school administrators part of the plan (See *Recommendation 8*). NSPRA offers a *Complete Crisis Communication Management Manual* that may be a useful resource for you.

For the communications staff to focus on high-impact communication priorities, they will likely need to stop doing some tasks and activities that are time-intensive but of limited value to the overall communication effort. The Director and senior staff should review and approve the strategic communication plan, and support the communications staff’s ability to say “no” to projects that do not directly support Grand Erie’s communication goals. Senior staff can also help by setting expectations for good communication in all board departments and shifting routine communication tasks to appropriate personnel.

Enhance the service provided by the communications department to schools and departments through communication training of staff, ready-to-use and template communication material, and effective use of technology.

You can use the recommendations in this communication audit report as the framework for developing the new plan. However, remember that a plan is just that — it should be dynamic. Do not view it as set in concrete. You must revise and adapt it as your accomplish objectives and as new communication challenges arise. NSPRA can provide samples of communication plans that can be used as a guide.

Recommendation 2:

Conduct regular research and evaluation on communication efforts.

Effective public relations and communications and marketing programs are based on a solid foundation of research. GEDSB collects relevant and useful data for many strategic initiatives that contain a great deal of helpful information, such as student and parent demographics and population trends, etc. Cite these data and any other existing research data collected by GEDSB in communication plans.

In addition to this excellent research base, we strongly recommend expanding communication research to identify what stakeholders know or don’t know, what information they want to receive, who the key audiences are for specific messages, and how those audiences prefer to receive their information. In today’s media-oriented society, information overload is a problem not just in the workplace, but at home

as well. Therefore, information must be interesting and valuable to target audiences to catch their attention.

GEDSB should also consider conducting a Gallup-style survey of the communities that the board serves once every 3 years. You could use the survey results over time to track public perceptions, identify communications needs and opportunities, and evaluate the effectiveness of overall communications efforts.

Before expending resources on developing communication plans for specific issues and programs, or redesigning or creating new publications, marketing campaigns, and other communication materials, conduct research to determine what is currently working or not working, what user preferences are, and which messages resonate with specific groups. Research-based communication will support GEDSB's efforts to engage and build solid relationships with key stakeholder groups.

This communication audit is a significant start that will guide GEDSB in developing a strategic communications plan, but you will need ongoing research to ensure that communication remains relevant and effective. Several focus group participants questioned the purpose and value of GEDSB's communication investment. By making research and measurement a priority, you can prove the value of effective communications.

Research does not have to be expensive or require a trained researcher. The communications staff and other departments can implement a number of effective strategies with a minimum amount of effort. Some suggestions include:

- **Conduct readership surveys of board and school newsletters and websites.** GEDSB, as well as individual schools, should conduct regular readership surveys of newsletters (print and electronic) and websites. The primary focus of publications should be to deliver news and information about the local schools and GEDSB based on what parents and community members say they want to know. The surveys can be simple, but the goal is to determine whether people are reading each publication and if they find the publications valuable. If not, you should eliminate them and invest the money in other communication activities.

A readership survey can also provide guidance on the type of information to expand in the publication. We suggest conducting surveys early in the year to determine reader interests and then again at the end of the school year to evaluate the effectiveness of changes.

You can conduct surveys online, by including an insert or tear-off page in print publications, or, at the school-level, by distributing them to parents at parent-teacher conferences or open houses.

Another strategy is to identify a small group of “reviewers” from each audience — you can ask this representative sample of “average” readers to give you feedback (by survey or face-to-face) immediately after publishing each issue. Ask about the quality and readability of the issue, along with input on their level of interest in proposed articles or

topics for upcoming issues. (*Recommendation 3 includes research ideas for the website.*)

- **Conduct periodic focus groups.** You can also use focus groups with parents, staff, and community members to gauge readership of publications and websites, as well as to gather input on a variety of other issues. They can be informal (by taking advantage of the opportunity to ask two or three questions of a group already meeting on another topic) or by formal invitation to share input on a specific issue or initiative GEDSB is considering. For example, consider conducting some focus groups to determine messages and strategies for future communication regarding Boundary 2020.

Recommendation 3:

Continue to improve the effectiveness and usability of the Grand Erie website, school websites, teacher web pages, intranet, email, social media and other digital communication.

The internet, digital communication and social media have dramatically changed the way school systems need to think about providing basic information, as well as how they interact with internal and external stakeholders and the general public. These new media are now critical communication and marketing tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of Grand Erie DSB and its schools. Given the significant percentage of staff, students, parents, and community residents who prefer to receive information through the web, digital communications will be key tools for Grand Erie.

Websites and other forms of digital communications will never eliminate the need for print publications and other communication channels. However, the potential of web-based communication to effectively reach target audiences will only continue to grow.

Some suggestions include:

- **Create formal, multi-disciplinary governance for inter/intranet.** Create a formal structure, such as an Inter/intranet Steering Committee, to govern future development of board website, school websites, teacher web pages, the intranet and social media. The Communications department should take the lead on branding, look and feel, navigation, the presentation layer, content, user testing and the identification of new functionality and information to meet user needs.

In addition, they should plan and deliver training and support to internal content owners who will be creating content and maintaining parts of the website.

The IT department should take the lead on identifying, testing, and implementing hardware and software that best meet user needs. You may want to bring other key content owners, such as the curriculum department, into the governance structure, particularly to identify internal training and support needs.

The Manager of Communications and the Manager of IT should jointly chair this integrated web development functional team. A member of the senior team should be the project sponsor.

This governance structure is especially critical because Grand Erie is planning to roll out a new SharePoint portal. SharePoint is a powerful enterprise tool if it is configured in a way that supports the needs of users. This is an opportunity to create a single integrated site — with internally and externally facing portions — that brings together what is now a patchwork of different applications.

- **Conduct research and user testing to determine future enhancements to websites, teacher pages, and intranets.** It is important to conduct ongoing evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of the board website, school websites, teacher pages, intranets, and email usage. Web analytics, such as WebTrends or Google Analytics, evaluate the number of visitors to each site, how long they spend on the site, which pages they visit most often, how they move through the site, and other useful information.

The Inter/intranet Steering Committee should regularly review web analytics statistics to gain a clear understanding of how various audiences are using these tools.

- **Another important way to gather user feedback is to host “hands on” sessions with various audiences.** Bring together groups of 6 to 10 users, such as parents, staff, and community residents. Give them a series of typical tasks to complete (finding information about how to register for school, for example). After performing several tasks, seek input about how user-friendly the experience was and how it could be improved. Ask users what additional information, interactive features, and functionality they would like to see added to the website.

Perform this type of user testing for the board website, school websites, teacher web pages and board and school intranets. Also, conduct user testing when you are going to implement major new changes to any of these websites to test that the new features are working as users would expect or want them to. This testing should be an integral ongoing part of maintaining Grand Erie’s external and internal sites.

- Another form of research is to **review “best in class” websites and intranets.** Examples of award-winning school board websites are available in the list of winners at http://nspra.org/awards/pubs_media#website. Also, view websites and intranets that have received awards from IABC, CPRS, Apex, *PR News* and other communications entities. Webinars offered through such organizations as IABC, PRSA and Ragan Communications also provide the opportunity to get an inside view of award-winning intranets. These web seminars can also provide valuable “how-to” insights. Extensive web usability information is available at www.useit.com.

- **Use interactive, dynamic content and functionality, and multimedia to engage users.** The best websites and intranets provide more than just static content for users. Rather, they provide users with dynamic content, which brings them back to these websites regularly. Multimedia features such as video, photos, and audio also engage users and keep them on the website longer. General web research shows that users want to customize websites to their own interests and needs. Social media elements such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter feeds, blogs, wikis and the ability to comment on items on the website increase user engagement. In addition to “pulling” users in with engaging content and functionality, the best websites also “push” out information through strategies such as customizable subscriptions and e-newsletters. Interactive functionality is also the hallmark of an effective website — to use the website to accomplish tasks (for example, registering for school or booking rental facilities online).
- **Improve usability through robust, user-intuitive search functionality.** One of the most important items on functionality on a website is the search functionality — users are more likely to go directly to the search box than to use traditional navigation. It is essential that the search functionality is intuitive and user friendly. Focus group participants reported that the search function did not work well for them. Since Google is now the standard for internet users, Grand Erie might want to consider purchasing and implementing Google search software for all websites and intranets it maintains.

Some other ways to maximize the power of search include the following:

- Implement *predictive search*¹ functionality.
- Implement *editorial picks*² as part of the search functionality. Using web analytics, determine the top searches and the top searched keywords³. For each of these top search terms, develop three to five suggestions of relevant content within the website — headline (hotlinked), along with one sentence or phrase to describe the content. These “best bets” would appear at the top or right of the regular search results whenever one of the top keywords is searched.

¹ *Predictive search*—when a user begins typing the first few letters of the search, possible topics that start with those letters appear, which the user can select from if they wish

² Editorial picks appear above or to the right of search results. Often headlined as “Best Bets,” they are search suggestions to the user. They supplement the search functionality with human judgment.

³ The top 25 search terms can account for up to half of all searches. The top 1% of search terms generally represents 25% of all searches.

Grand Erie Website

Focus group participants often cited the Grand Erie website as an important source of information. Grand Erie can build on the current strengths of the website and improve areas that are not working well for users.

- **Redesign the home page to engage users.** The current Grand Erie home page is well designed, clean, and uncluttered. At the same time, some changes are required to make the home page as effective as it could be. A makeover of the home page can significantly improve the usability of the Grand Erie website. The following changes could be implemented in short-term, while other website improvements are planned and implemented.
 - **Move the search box to the top right-hand side of the screen**, above the words Achievement Environment Engagement. It has become website convention that the search box is located at the top right of the home page screen.
- The search function should search only within the Grand Erie website. **We recommend that you remove the option to search the web.**
- **Add a “subscribe” feature to the home page.** Give users a variety of choices of types of information to subscribe to — news releases, the *Blackboard* newsletter, job postings, “what’s new on the website,” etc. User testing will help determine items that visitors wish to receive by email. Alternatively, create an RSS feed on key website pages, to automatically notify visitors when new or updated information is posted to the page. This will allow the website to “push” specific information out to interested audiences.
- The aim should be that, whenever possible, to deliver content to users within one click. **Replace the current left-hand navigation selections with the top 10 most search/visited pages, in order of user interest** (i.e., the top visited page listed first). Another four to six left-hand navigation selections can be used to highlight strategic content — such as the Multi-Year Plan.
- **Add a “Follow us” option on the home page**, with a link to the official Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts, as well as school social media sites. (*See more detail below in social media section.*)
- Drop-down menus are an effective way to push content forward. To make the top navigation drop down menus more user-friendly, **organize the options in alphabetical order or most viewed to least viewed**. At present, the order appears to be random.
- **Redesign the middle of the page to feature three stories** rather than just one. Use photos and video to draw users into the stories.

- **Anywhere “click here” appears, delete those words and hotlink part of the preceding text.** Do this throughout the website.
- **Add an FAQ section**, linked to the home page. FAQs can serve as a useful resource for the public, parents and staff by providing answers to information most often sought by parents and others. Initially, you can develop this section by asking each department to submit the questions they receive often. You can also ask school secretaries for their top inquiries. To make this feature more interactive, invite visitors and internal staff to suggest additions to the FAQs.
- The chicklets at the bottom of the page are an effective way to highlight time-sensitive content. **Change these chicklets regularly to promote timely content.**
 - **Update the copyright** date on the website to the current year — by having the copyright date as 2010, it makes the site look dated.

Future enhancements to be considered for the home page include the following:

- **Create a mobile version of the website.**
- **Consider adding commenting to home page news stories to increase user engagement.**
- **Add widgets** such as *Most Viewed* and *Most Emailed* and a tag cloud that will allow users to navigate story by keyword tag.
- **Provide access to information about the Multi-Year Plan**, annual operational plans based on the goals, projects connected to the Multi-Year Plan and progress on achieving goals. Currently, very limited information is available on the website about the Grand Erie Multi-Year Plan — just the mission, beliefs, vision, values and the video. Rather, there is just a 1-page description of the planning process. Visitors should be able to access Grand Erie’s strategic plan directly from the home page and, if interested, get detailed information about the activities related to the Multi-Year Plan, including current operational plans and projects. Accountability would be enhanced by making it easy for users to access data about the progress as Grand Erie works towards achieving its goals. This section would also be an opportunity to help various audiences understand their role in the strategic plan.
- **Use the website to deliver key messages.** Consider information placed on the website in the context of how it delivers key messages. Home page news and other content should serve to reinforce the key messages and objectives of the strategic communication plan.
- **Use the website to respond to issues and counter rumours.** Use the Grand Erie website for “myth busting” and to counter the rumour mill, as well as to respond to emerging

issues. Whenever an important issue is up for discussion — or leaders learn of misinformation that is being propagated in the community — post accurate, factual information in this section to “set the record straight.”

- **Incorporate use of the website into the crisis communication plan.** Websites are also critical information conduits during crises, and it is helpful to keep this in mind when planning content for the site. Develop crisis information pages in advance. The pages should contain basic response information (i.e., student pick-up, evacuation locations, media briefings, basic board/school facts used in news stories, such as enrolment, grade levels, number of employees, etc.). Consider creating at least one “dark” page for each school, to be activated in case of a crisis. This page could include evacuation location, emergency contacts, key facts about the school, and other elements from Grand Erie’s crisis plan. You can then activate or post that information on the website when necessary.
- **Improve the “home page” of each main section of the website.** Currently, these landing pages simply repeat the navigation from the home page drop-down menu. Once in a main section, the navigation for that section should appear on the left-hand side, rather than the home page navigation. Based on analytics and user testing, highlight the most important content for that section — much in the same style as the home page (i.e., highlighting several items, what’s new, timely content, etc.)
- **Add more navigation choices to the top navigation of the home page.** Based on user testing and on the information needs of various audiences, add other main sections to the website.
- **Enable users to share website content.** On every page of the website, provide a number of ways in which users can share the content — email, tweet it, post on Facebook or LinkedIn, bookmark, Digg it, etc.
- **Bring *Pathways to Success* section of the website into the Grand Erie brand.** Currently, this website has a look and feel totally unrelated to Grand Erie, with no branding or connection to the board. Once in that section, there is no connection back to the Grand Erie website. In the short-term, add a link to the top of the left-hand navigation. User testing with middle and secondary students should be ongoing. Though the website needs to be appealing and useful to teens, it must also be connected more closely to the Grand Erie website and brand.
- **Calendarize website content to ensure it is current and accurate.** For each item of content on the website, determine a calendar date by which it should be removed from the site or reviewed to ensure it is current/accurate. At minimum, review the content annually. This calendar will also identify the title of the staff member responsible for ensuring

the accuracy of the content — normally the person responsible for the content in “real life” should also be responsible for the website content review.

- **Give users the ability to “share” items on the website** — print, email to a friend, bookmark or forward to sharing sites such as Digg. See www.addthis.com as an example. This will allow visitors to help “spread” the board’s content.
- **Create a “News Room” on the website.** Currently, it does not appear there are any news releases or any media relations information on the Grand Erie website. To better serve the routine information needs of the media, create a section of the website specifically for reporters. This should be accessible through a direct link on the home page. Easier access and additional information will make the site more “media-friendly.” Talk to the local reporters who regularly cover Grand Erie to determine what information to provide in the media section.

Some suggestions for bolstering media content include:

- Provide all news releases — from most current. Archive previous years’ news releases.
- Provide current and archived issues of *Blackboard* newsletter.
- Provide fact sheets on Grand Erie that includes data such as enrolment and staffing numbers by school; demographic breakdowns; age of buildings and historical notes; etc.
- Include links to bios and high-resolution headshots of the Director, senior staff and trustees.
- Link to high-resolution artwork of the board logo, logos of other key initiatives, photographs of the board office, and other important visuals.
- Provide contact information the Communications Manager and any other media contacts (including email, cell phones and any other after hours contact information).
- Include an archive of board publications, including the Director’s Annual Reports, Register for Kindergarten package, etc.
- Post video, b-roll and/or high-resolution photos of breaking board news or special events.
- Provide a media sourcebook — a list of Grand Erie staff who are experts on various topics of potential media interest (i.e., homework; settlement of newcomers; special subject areas such as math and literacy, nutrition, study tips; how to help children

deal with grief; how to deal with divorce or blended families; etc.) Keep the list up to date and add topics and contacts as issues become “hot topics.” Also include staff with interesting or unusual areas of expertise.

- Provide media policies and guidelines for:
 - Requesting interviews with board personnel.
 - Parent consent for students to be photographed/interviewed.
 - School visits.
 - How Grand Erie will communicate with the media in a crisis. This should include identifying a primary contact and spokesperson; procedures for news briefings and handling requests for interviews or access to campuses; location of media bullpen areas; and any policies related to crisis management.
- **Put the top news stories from the news room on the home page.** Media and others must be able to subscribe to new information posted to the News Room.

If there are issues, Grand Erie should “break” the news on its website first. From school lockdowns to serious occurrences, there should be status updates on the home page/News Room.

Make other related materials — such as parent letters — available. Grand Erie should aim to “scoop” the media by “breaking” any stories on its own website before they appear in the local media.

- **Market the website.** Remember to use every opportunity to market the website by requesting that all board-level staff add the website address to their email signatures and making sure that the website address appears on all print materials, board signage, board vehicles, etc. Grand Erie should consider the website to be a key component of the overall communication, marketing and branding strategy.

School Websites

Parents and the community are increasingly looking to school websites as an important information source. School staff wish to communicate more effectively through their websites, but feel they lack the skills, time and training to do so. Focus group participants acknowledged the lack of consistency among school websites — some are current, up to date, and highly effective while others are not. Effective, up-to-date school sites can help strengthen the Grand Erie brand, but poor sites will have the opposite effect.

It is important that information on all of the Grand Erie school websites be up to date at all times. While it is comparatively easy to get people to visit a website once, the challenge is getting them to return regularly for new information.

More direct user input from school staff and parents will help Grand Erie determine specific improvements needed to school websites. The following suggestions are based on focus group comments, a review of existing school sites and best practices among other school boards.

- **Increase support for school websites.** Many individual schools lack the time and skills to keep their websites up to date. Today's connected parents expect to be able to access school information via the Internet, communicate quickly via email and receive important information from the school in a timely manner.
- **Individual school websites must be planned and evaluated with an eye to marketing.** As parents come to expect ready access to online information about their children's schools, it is also important that the school websites provide current information and opportunities for parents to supplement the school program at home. The inconsistent quality of individual school websites is a significant issue, as is the disparity between the schools that have active sites and those that do not.
- **Consult with school staff to determine the support they need and the best way to deliver this support.** It could take the form of training (in person as well as web-based), template and ready-to-use web content (stories, graphics and photographs), direct one-to-one support, on-call technical support, etc.
- **Make templates for school websites easier for schools to use and maintain.** Grand Erie's provision of a template for school websites is an important strategy for consistency and branding. However, school staff find the current templates rigid and difficult to use. As GEDSB takes over control of school websites from the external hosting vendor, there is an opportunity to update these templates, based on parent, student and school feedback, to better meet user needs. Use web analytics and other user testing to determine what information currently offered is of interest to parents. Focus groups and surveys will determine new content and functionality.
- **Provide a choice of design/navigation templates,** based on the school configuration (i.e., junior schools need a template with different design and navigation than secondary schools).
- **Consider providing an option for schools of a website that is completely database-driven** (i.e., all the content comes from a board-level database), especially for elementary schools who currently have no website. Many schools would be happy to have a website that is always up to date without any effort on their part. For schools that want more robust, personalized content, establish standards and provide content management tools that ensure out-of-date content is automatically removed. For example, there must be a plan to ensure that the websites remain current and useful to parents during the summer, when school staff are away.

The template should pre-determine certain links and content that all school websites should feature — for example, a link to the Multi-Year Plan.

The copyright date on all school websites should be centrally, automatically updated to the current calendar year. By having a copyright date several years past, it makes the site look outdated.

- **Develop a plan for transitioning school websites to GEDSB control.** School administrators are concerned about how the transition of the websites will work. It is essential to work with school administrators and current website administrators to develop a transition plan. You need ample two-way communication throughout this process.
- **Support high-value functionality on school websites.** Create the functionality for parents to subscribe to news and emergency alerts via the school website. This will allow the school and board to communicate rapidly with parents if there is an urgent situation at the school, as well as providing more routine information electronically for those parents who prefer this type of communication. Most parents prefer school information to be emailed to them, rather than having to go to the website or receiving hard copies of newsletters, etc. Develop and support new functionality that parents identify as valuable to them; for example, pay or donate online, complete and submit forms online, etc.
- **Enhance and support teacher pages.** Grand Erie has made an effective start in providing teachers with a template for a class/homework page. Follow up with teachers who are using the tool will determine what additional support they need to use it effectively. Web analytics will help demonstrate how often they are being accessed. Feedback sessions will help to determine how these pages can be made more user-friendly and what additional information and functionality parents and students want.

The teacher sites are currently difficult to find. They should be accessible directly from the school's home page.

Parents should have the option to subscribe to receive an email when there is new content on the teacher page. If possible, the content should appear in the email, rather than requiring the parent to visit the website.

Since it is optional for teachers to maintain an individual web page, Grand Erie should provide template teacher pages by grade (elementary school) or subject (secondary school) for teachers who choose not to activate a page. These pages could include general information about the curriculum expectations and tips for parents.

Give more thought to keeping the teacher pages up-to-date and to setting standards for what happens with these sites over the summer. Content that might be useful to parents over the summer might include school supplies that will be needed for the start of school, summer reading lists or learning links.

- **Market school websites.** Schools should use every opportunity to market their website by requesting that all school staff add the website address to their email signatures and making sure that the website address appears on the school letterhead, envelopes, business cards, newsletters, school signage and any other material produced by the school. The school should consider its website to be a key component of the overall communication, marketing and branding strategy.

Board Intranet

Currently, Grand Erie does not have a real intranet. Some components of what would traditionally be found on an intranet are located in First Class. My E-Centre also has some of the features that would usually be found in an intranet.

Staff focus groups strongly support the need for an effective intranet. Many were aware of rumours about introducing a SharePoint “portal,” but they do not know what that means or how it will affect them. It is essential to begin communicating with all staff immediately, rather than allowing rumours and conjecture to swirl.

Since the intranet does not yet exist and Grand Erie is just in the process of beginning to work with SharePoint, an excellent opportunity exists to develop a highly user-focused intranet that enhances the ability of employees to do their work effectively. By going beyond the concept of document repository, the intranet can be developed as a powerful tool for internal communication and collaboration.

- **Involve users at every stage of the development of the intranet.** Staged, iterative development and implementation will allow Grand Erie to roll out certain high-value functionality and content first, test it and make modifications and improvements that will enhance future phases of implementation.

The detailed focus group notes from internal groups contain many details of features that would be useful in a new intranet. Some main themes and common needs include the following:

- **Personalization.** Staff want and need the intranet to be a true internal portal. When a staff member logs in, the portal should recognize which group the employee belongs to and present a version of the intranet home page customized for that employee. The information and online tools pushed forward for an elementary teacher would be different from secretary or central board office manager, for example. Through user-friendly navigation, all content and functionality would be accessible to all staff, if they need it. This approach will make the most efficient use of the limited time that staff—have to access a computer during their workday. All staff, including casual employees, should have home access to the intranet. Effective use of this portal approach has the potential to significantly reduce email overload.
- **Customization.** Staff also want the ability to customize the portal to their individual needs. So, part of the intranet home page could be “locked down” with board

information and tools that are essential, while another part can be customized to the needs of the individual — each individual can choose pages they access frequently to be linked directly from their customized section of the home page.

- **Functionality.** A significant focus for the intranet should be on delivering organization-wide functionality that improves efficiency, eliminates or reduces manual processes and duplication of effort and helps staff do their jobs more effectively. Some examples of high-value functionality that could be delivered via the intranet include the following:
 - Submission and status tracking of facilities work orders
 - Submission and processing of forms such as travel claims
 - Delivery of required training through interactive online modules
- Prioritizing which functionality to deliver should be based both on organizational needs and user input. Evaluation of improved efficiencies and service standards can demonstrate the intranet's return-on-investment.
- **Web 2.0 capabilities and collaboration tools.** The intranet can serve an important function in facilitating communication and collaboration between staff members through web 2.0 tools. For example, many staff members in the focus groups talked about how difficult it was to find out who does what. The intranet can provide an internal director which has many of the features of an “internal Facebook,” providing a profile of information about staff member, including key areas of responsibility and photo. A staff member looking up a colleague in the directory would see whether the person is “online” or not, facilitating contact. Many other collaboration tools, such as wikis and team spaces, could be rolled out based on identified needs.

School/department Intranets

SharePoint provides the functionality to provide schools and departments with their own site-based intranet (My Department, My School), as well as team-based sites. As Grand Erie begins to implement SharePoint, it's important to consider how these local sites will be developed.

It's important to find a balance between allowing these sites to develop without any standards or centralization, but at the same time allow sites and teams the flexibility to use these tools in a way that works best for them. You must build this aspect of the intranet's development into the planning and discussion with users from the beginning. Consider the training and support needed for school administrators and managers to use this tool effectively. Take care to make sure it does not take the place of communication that would best be done face-to-face.

Email

Most internal focus group participants identify email as one of the main ways that they receive information. However, most also identified email overload as a serious issue. Mass emails that are not well-targeted can take up valuable staff time and contribute to employees feeling overwhelmed. In the absence of any internal communication vehicles, over-relying on email has become a serious issue.

Email overload is a significant workplace issue in all organizations. Some research shows that reading a single email can cause employees to lose 5 to 15 minutes, as they return to the work they were doing before the email interruption and regain their train of thought. Some emails are clearly essential to the work that staff members are doing, but over-using email can seriously erode employees' productivity and contribute to their sense that their workload is unmanageable. Organizations must manage the expectations that employees will respond immediately to every email. Guidelines and protocols must help staff identify urgent emails from those that can wait for a reasonable time before they receive a response.

With many school-based staff having limited access to computers and very little time to check email, Grand Erie should work with administrative staff and employee groups to develop email protocols and guidelines. Much of what is now being communicated by email can be done through improved internal communication methods and an enhanced intranet.

Examples of email guidelines and protocols could include the following:

- **Have a manager or superintendent approve all mass emails to schools.** As much as possible, departments should try to coordinate the mass emails that are sent, to ensure that schools and staff are not overloaded.
- **Carefully think about the timing of when emails are sent** — whether they are mass emails or just sent to one person. Save non-urgent emails in draft form and send them at either the beginning or end of the day, enabling staff to allocate a certain time in their day for replying to non-urgent email, rather than being interrupted constantly throughout their workday.
- **Label all emails in the subject line with the response required.** For example, *Urgent Action, Action, Information, Post for Staff*, etc. Develop the categories of response in collaboration with departments and staff groups. Clear criteria should exist about when to mark a message as *Urgent*. Many focus group participants raised the issue of over-use of the *urgent* label.
- **Use a headline in all email subject lines** (subject + active verb) that gives the key message of the email. For example: *Action: Complete Ministry enrolment reports by Oct. 1* rather than *Ministry reporting*.

- **Only use attachments if necessary.** Paste memos of three paragraphs or less directly into the email; do not attach them.
- **Post all email attachments on the intranet for future reference.** Since the information is on the intranet, carefully consider whether it is necessary to send it by email.
- **Make emails as brief and concise as possible.** As much as possible, write email memos in point form, using action verbs.
- **Copy all emails sent to school principals to school secretaries.**
- **Consider having an email “pause” day** — a day during which no mass emails will be sent to schools.

Have a dialogue with staff at all levels in developing the email protocols, as well as discussion about how the email protocols will be implemented and evaluated. Use analytics to measure the extent to which emails are reduced in number and size. Gather staff input at regular intervals to evaluate how successful the protocols have been.

Another issue raised by staff focus group participants are the rumours that the board is going to move to Outlook email from the current First Class system. While many staff do not find First Class as user-friendly as they would like, they are concerned about what a new email system might mean. Grand Erie should communicate with staff about the current Outlook pilot project, including clear information about how the board will decide on next steps in the pilot. Involve staff in any potential transition, and clear, frequent communication is essential.

Social Media

An emerging new, but rapidly growing, area of e-communication is social media. This term describes a wide array of web-based communication channels designed to promote direct person-to-person communication — blogs, podcasts, wikis, social networking, presence networks, video and photo-sharing websites, etc.

Social media offers challenges and opportunities to Grand Erie. The first challenge is to learn more about how social media could be used to achieve the board’s communication goals. A second challenge is to provide the technology tools that will allow communications staff and other Grand Erie employees to begin using social media. With limited communication staff, there is a challenge about how to sustain effective social media activities. As well, many staff within GEDSB are leery of social media — students, on the other hand, embrace this form of communication, as do many parents and community members.

Many web 2.0 tools are available in SharePoint, so the Communications and IT departments must work together to plan how to make these tools available for organizational communications and to individual staff and students. Consider bringing the internet filtering in line with the social media policy — for

example, if the board has a YouTube channel, then YouTube should not be blocked in Grand Erie schools and worksites. Rather than relying on filtering, which most students can bypass with their personal devices such as cell phones and iPods, consider focusing on appropriate use policies.

There are many workshops, books and online resources that can help communication staff learn more about social media, including the following: <http://social-media-university-global.org>

Grand Erie should develop a staff social media policy. Some companies post their policy on their external website. One good example is www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html.

- Our recommendation is that **within the next year, Grand Erie begin to incorporate social media strategies into communication plans, particularly as a way to communicate with students, but also strategically to reach other specialized audiences.** A request through OPSBA and CACE for samples of social media policies and plans from other school boards will be useful.
- **Communications staff should also monitor major social media channels regularly to identify and analyze any conversation about Grand Erie or its schools.**

Here are some suggested for elements to include initially in the social media policy/plan:

- Many schools, school councils and student councils have their Facebook sites and other social media presence. Create an inventory of these sites, including contact person. Link to them from the Grand Erie site and require a link from their sites back to the board site.
- In the social media policy, provide a few guidelines for these sites. The guidelines should be flexible and common sense, but protect Grand Erie's reputation.
- Leverage these sites — many of which have hundreds of active users — by asking them to post board content on their sites. It's important to target the content to the audience. For example, information about the parent engagement symposium would be appropriate for school council Facebook pages, but not student council pages. Deadlines for choosing high school courses for next year, or information about new SHSM programs, would be relevant for student council pages.
- On the Grand Erie website home page, create a "Follow us" button that links to a page listing the lists and links to Grand Erie's official sites and school, council and student social media sites.
- Create a Grand Erie Twitter account. Establish a Grand Erie hashtag and publicize it. Initially, use the Twitter account to leverage existing news and other updates. For example, after the board meeting when *Blackboard* is posted on the website, send out a

tweet with website link. Establish basic guidelines for staff with Twitter accounts, such as encouraging them to use the hashtag and retweeting board news.

- Create “outpost” accounts for GEDSB on the major social media sites — Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn. These sites can initially be used as one-way communication (by disabling commenting features) to direct users back to the main Grand Erie website. News releases and other Grand Erie news and resources can be posted simultaneously on all of these outpost accounts, thus leveraging and extending the reach of existing communication activities.
- Subscribe to “Help a Reporter Out,” www.helpareporter.com Reporters looking for sources for stories they are working on post a request. Using the list of media experts in the online News Room, this is an opportunity to help raise Grand Erie’s profile among media beyond the local communities and share the great things happening in GEDSB schools.
- Set up Google alerts to monitor mentions of Grand Erie on social media channels. This serves as an early warning system to the Communications Manager to identify emerging issues in the community.

Recommendation 4:

Become more proactive and systematic with communication efforts.

In today’s 24/7, instant-access information environment, the public has become much more sophisticated about the type and quality of communication they desire. And they are demanding “real time” answers and updates on issues and actions that touch their child, their school, or their wallet, along with a voice in decision-making.

Today’s successful communication programs, be they for school systems or for private companies, seek to engage stakeholders in two-way communication targeted to their needs. Focus group feedback on participants’ best sources of information confirms that no single channel of communication reaches every member of the community.

The challenge is making sure information is relevant, readily available and offered in easily accessible formats. Most of the communications department’s time should be spent on systematic, planned and proactive communication, rather than reacting to events and issues as they occur.

We believe GEDSB can take several steps to move the communication effort in this direction:

- **Develop a clear vision for the communications program.** The Communications Manager is responsive to a myriad of internal and external audiences and involved in a multitude

of communication activities, both strategic and tactical. The office handles media requests, website content and design, issue and crisis counseling, special events coordination, publications, marketing, school-level PR assistance, parent communication, and many other miscellaneous support activities.

The day-to-day communication demands alone of a large and complex school system can easily consume staff time. Such demands also leave little time or resources for strategic communications planning and evaluation. This often results in a great deal of general and reactive communication being produced. Clearly, the Communications Manager invested major time and energy in developing resources to support the Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015, along with the ongoing publication needs. Beyond these two examples, however, communication efforts seem to lack focus. As a result, the Communications Manager is probably often reacting to the latest communication crisis or priority request. When “urgent communication” becomes the focus, proactive communication opportunities that support the overall mission and goals are missed.

As part of clarifying the vision for the communications function and building understanding of the role of the communications department, GEDSB leadership can use this communication audit report to determine critical communication, marketing, and engagement priorities. A thorough review may help identify areas that can be decreased in emphasis and others that need more support. Not only will this help in focusing the communications effort, it will also help to ensure that the communications department does not become a “catch all” for tasks that might better belong in other departments. Once you articulate a vision, staff can begin to develop a strategic communication plan (*See Recommendation 1*) and identify the timelines and resources that will be needed to implement the plan.

- **Communicate key messages internally first** (*See Recommendation 5*). Several internal focus groups commented on the fact that they often feel “out of the loop” or hear things through “the grapevine” before receiving information from GEDSB. It is important to note that internal buy-in of key messages is critical before they can successfully be delivered to parents and the public. Some suggestions for disseminating key messages internally include:
 - Communicate with staff *before* messages are disseminated to external audiences and the media. This can be done through face-to-face meetings, internal newsletters/memos or emails, etc.
 - Give staff opportunities ask questions and discuss the issue or initiative being addressed. Unless they understand the rationale and the process being used to address the issue, it is difficult for them to become advocates.
 - Include messages as headings on the intranet.
- Share key messages with the leaders of all federations and employee unions.

- **Communicate the rationale behind decisions and report the outcomes on all issues and projects.** While board and school leaders always strive to make good decisions on behalf of students, there is a risk of being perceived negatively if information or background material used to make a decision on an issue is not shared with the staff and community. Explaining to staff and the public the genesis and rationale for specific actions and projects, and then reporting back to them on results, will help to close the information loop and build trust in leadership. Ensuring that the rationale for decisions is presented, along with the outcome, is a critical role for the communications department. Accountability and trust is increased when the process is transparent, not just the final decision.

This also extends to the various board advisory committees and task forces. These groups should always receive feedback on what was done with recommendations or reports so that committee members do not think their time has been wasted or their input wasn't valued. Communication follow-through is critical if GEDSB truly wants to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way.

GEDSB should continue its efforts to create a communication environment based on openness, honesty and trust, and all communication efforts should support and promote this goal. The overall priority for communication should be to build and enhance GEDSB's relationships with all stakeholders.

- **Make sure a critical communications infrastructure is in place.** In an era of transparency and instant communication, GEDSB needs to be able to reach all key stakeholders within a 30- to 60-minute timeframe with critical information. As GEDSB looks to the future of its communication program and the infrastructure needed to support it, consider the following checklist compiled by NSPRA member Nora Carr, APR:

- ✓ **Do you have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, political, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and nonprofit organizations?**
- ✓ **Do you have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?**
- ✓ **When news breaks, can you get information posted on the board website within minutes?**
- ✓ **Can your communications staff quickly provide talking points and develop key messages for senior staff, principals and the board of trustees?**
- ✓ **Do you have a bank of crisis messages and letters posted on the intranet or in a shared-file that principals can access at any time and adapt to communicate more effectively with parents?**
- ✓ **Does your technology management system provide you with reports that show what groups and individuals the board has contacted via email and whether they are accessing the information you are providing?**
- ✓ **Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive board news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts, and other communications?**
- ✓ **Do employees, parents, reporters, and community members turn to your website first for current news and information regarding the board and the schools?**

- **Expand two-way communication with opinion leaders.** External stakeholders, particularly municipal leaders, said in the focus groups that they want to be more involved and engaged with the schools. GEDSB should develop a formal key communicator network that focuses on expanding existing relationships and building new ones with influential members of the community who in turn can help deliver key messages and serve as an extended force of “ambassadors” for GEDSB. Although current technology has made it easy and convenient to communicate directly with large numbers of people in a timely fashion, it does not replace the value and effectiveness of face-to-face communication with a small group of influential community and staff opinion leaders.

The individuals invited to participate should be credible members of target audiences identified by GEDSB; people to whom others go for “the real story.” The group should be a manageable size (or divided into groups to be met with separately) to allow for productive face-to-face meetings and relationship-building.

The Director and other senior staff members should meet with these opinion leaders on a regular basis, using the meetings to give the leaders updates about major issues facing GEDSB and consulting with them about emerging initiatives. It will also be important to send them progress reports on the Multi-Year Plan 2011-2015, so they can see progress being made. In addition, we encourage the Communications Manager to create a special key communicator e-news update for reporting on student achievement and progress toward goals as well as breaking news and crisis communications.

This type of group is effective because it comprises people who are respected and influential members of a specific group of constituents. They are perceived as having access to “inside” information, and they are considered to be a believable and credible source of accurate information. You can also use this group as a sounding board to test new ideas or provide insight on political agendas, as a conduit to deliver key messages to stakeholders, and as an early warning system on emerging issues and concerns. Also, give these key communicators a “hot line” number (usually the communications office) to call if they need information or hear of an erroneous statement or rumor that needs correcting.

NSPRA offers a step-by-step *Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Key Communicator Programs* if you need additional information on getting a key communicator network started.

- **Create regular outreach opportunities for trustees.** Trustees are ideally equipped to provide community outreach on behalf of GEDSB in certain key areas. One of these is liaison with the municipalities in the region. Because of the number of municipalities in the area, it is a challenge to build and maintain regular contact with all of them. Trustees should set up regular meetings, perhaps two or three times a school year, with the elected municipal politicians in the area they represent. You could use these meetings to share information about major new developments at GEDSB and to learn about important news from the municipalities. As well, you can use these meetings to consult with municipalities on any issues or topics of mutual concern. The communications department could prepare a

briefing sheet for trustees before these meetings, and trustees could provide a brief verbal report at board meetings about any highlights of these meetings.

Trustees might also want to set up regular meetings with the school council chairs in the area they represent. The purpose of these meetings would be to build relationships, listen to input from councils and share board news and perspectives. The communications department could provide a sheet of speaking points for such meetings two or three times a year.

Individual trustees might identify other groups they wish to meet with regularly in the community — for example, business leaders or seniors. Any meetings that trustees hold with community groups should be tracked in a relational database.

- **Develop a stakeholder management system.** We recommend that GEDSB begin building a relational database including the names, addresses, email addresses, phone/fax numbers, etc., of key communicators and leaders in the community. Since email use is not as prevalent in some rural communities, it would be important to include a preferred method of receiving information for each contact. This would allow GEDSB to more effectively target key communications to specific audiences.

Off-the-shelf stakeholder management software offers the ability to send targeted email messages to a variety of leaders and key constituent groups that will bolster communication across the board. This list of key communicators, if sorted appropriately, can be of great value to all of GEDSB's communications and relationship-building efforts. Once you have created working lists, you can develop e-newsletters and alerts with targeted information for each group, with traditional mail and phone messaging used for those who do not have Internet access. Also use the stakeholder management system to keep track of all face-to-face meetings and to document any issues, requests, partnerships, etc., that emerge as the board builds better relationships with these community contacts.

- **Add a “how this [issue/decision/information, etc.] will be communicated” section to agendas for administrative, principal and advisory committee meetings and board of trustees meetings.** This suggestion is simple, but can help to create a culture that encourages people to think about communication. Such a reminder on agendas will stimulate discussions about decisions and issues, and will lead to better, timelier communication with key stakeholder groups.
- **Strive for message consistency in parent/staff communication and in school procedures.** One of the communication challenges cited by focus group participants is the need to ensure more consistency in messages and communication processes in schools across the entire system. Given the geographic size of the region it serves, GEDSB should establish basic standards and protocols that all schools are expected to follow. For example, you could develop protocols on how principals communicate outcomes with staff after Trustee meetings. An example for parent communication might be developing consistent timing and methods for distributing the school calendar. This

also helps to reduce confusion for parents who have children at different grade levels and schools and for staff who have responsibilities at multiple campuses.

■ **Provide talking points and key message reference guides for GEDSB leaders and staff.**

The communications staff should continue to work with the trustees, the Director, and administrators to ensure that accurate and consistent key messages are developed before making public statements. The trustees said that they really appreciate having talking points and messages when an issue arises. Although talking points have been developed on some major issues, particularly for the trustees, we recommend that it become a common practice for a range of additional issues and challenges. Whenever individual trustees or administrators are asked to respond to the media or speak to community groups, they should have a list of talking points related to their topic, or, if they are giving a general overview of GEDSB, a list of programs and initiatives that directly support the organizational mission, vision and goals, as well as information on progress toward those goals. In whatever format the information is provided, we have found that people appreciate having it so that they feel confident that they are truly voicing the board's position and message.

In addition, whenever GEDSB needs to communicate specific information (i.e., special initiatives, crisis responses, program and policy changes), key messages should be developed to share with all staff and key communicators in the community. By being proactive and getting complete and accurate information into the hands of those who are on the front lines of communication, GEDSB can ensure clarity and consistency in its messages. It is important to remember that in the absence of solid, timely information, others will seek to fill the gap and hamper GEDSB's ability to manage its message and communicate effectively.

- **Develop fact sheets and/or backgrounders on framed issues.** Fact sheets can be developed for any identified issues and used in numerous ways. You can post fact sheets on the website, link them in e-newsletters, share them with all employees, and email them directly to key communicators. You can place printed copies in schools, at the central office and at local dentist or doctor offices and other businesses with waiting areas. You will need to update these fact sheets as changes are made, but they could become a "go-to" resource on key issues for all school staff, board members, community and parent leaders, and other involved individuals.

The following grid is a sample format for communicating about specific issues. The grid becomes a single fact sheet that explains the issue, its current status, and how stakeholders can become actively involved. It is critical to update the fact sheets regularly. They help ensure that everyone speaks in “one clear voice” about issues affecting the future of the schools.

Issue at a Glance	Increasing Enrolment at a Time of Decline
Description	Population trends continue to impact enrolment levels at GEDSB schools.
Work to Date	Explain studies, meetings to gather input, and planning done to date. Explain the “why” behind decisions.
Barriers to Progress	List of items such as budget, time, approvals, etc.
What’s Next	Explain work yet to be completed, including direct interaction with affected communities, possible marketing to parents and students to boost enrolment.
Your Involvement	You can help our schools with this issue by...
Key Messages and Talking Points	GEDSB is addressing the issue in the following ways... (include specifics)
For More Information	List contact.

Recommendation 5:

Improve internal communication systems and processes.

Internal communication currently is a major weakness of the GEDSB. And it is one of the more critical components of success for every Board and private and public sector company. Right now, the effort is inconsistent and appears more haphazard than planned. Other than *Blackboard*, there is no regular internal communication. Emails flow and then flow again. No one seems sure who is responsible for certain operational areas and the lack of a coherent internal communication system feeds into the silo approach that hampers GEDSB to function as one unified board.

Improving internal communication must be a top priority of your communication planning.

To communicate effectively and credibly in “one clear voice,” all employees must understand that good communication and public relations is not solely the responsibility of administrators and the communications department. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of the responsibility for this role, from the Trustees to part-time employees. They must understand the power and influence they personally and collectively hold over public perception of and satisfaction with GEDSB schools.

The internal framework of communication is the infrastructure that supports all external communication efforts and is an essential component of any communications plan. Staff focus groups mentioned that information is not always shared effectively through all levels of the board. This may be the result of busy administrators assuming that employees already know the outcomes of decisions or they may be simply forgetting to share information. Focus groups also talked about inconsistency in information from school to school and department to department. Whatever the reason, it is important that GEDSB leaders “close the information loop” by explaining to staff the genesis and rationale behind decisions and initiatives and then keep them informed about progress and results.

Employees are frontline communicators who should receive important information before the media and public. When an issue emerges or when GEDSB begins to address a problem or concern, it is essential that senior leaders incorporate a “staff first” focus into strategic communication efforts. When staff members rely on the “grapevine” to get information, it hampers GEDSB’s efforts to provide accurate and credible responses to issues. Employees are well connected to parents and community members and are considered by external groups to be a trusted source of information. They can serve as ambassadors if they are aware of current issues and the rationale behind the decisionmaking process and feel prepared to respond to questions.

Timeliness and message consistency are critical to developing a strong, effective internal communication program. When employees feel as though they are “the last to know” or information comes to them through non-board channels (such as the news media or parents), they do not feel they are valued

members of the GEDSB team, and it is difficult for them to embrace their important roles as ambassadors for the schools. By recognizing the important role employees play as communicators and ambassadors for education and supporting them in this effort with timely information, key messages, and training when appropriate, GEDSB can exponentially expand its communication outreach in the community. Some suggestions for improving internal communications include:

- **Develop a regular e-newsletter for employees.** A regularly published internal e-newsletter (preferably weekly) designed specifically for employees, that looks forward would better meet staff information needs. Provide information in a brief, tightly-written format and drive employees through links or a portal for more extensive or detailed information. This keeps e-publications short and reader-friendly and will build use of the website and intranet as an important information source. You can include live links to newly released national studies and reports from the province or other related websites for those interested in more indepth information on specific topics. You can publish special “Alert” editions as needed (i.e., on time-sensitive topics, crisis situations or incidents of concern involving students). For an e-publication to provide timely information to staff, others in GEDSB will need to assist in this effort by submitting information from their schools and departments to the communications department.

It is also important that staff be aware of information that is being shared with parents and the public so that they are prepared to answer questions or clarify issues. To ensure that employees understand the importance of staying current on things taking place around the board, consider providing links to news releases and other information that will be distributed to parents and the public under a special heading such as *News to Know*. This should include a short statement explaining that as frontline communicators and “ambassadors” for GEDSB, the board wants to make sure employees are well-informed in advance.

The immediacy of an e-publication (not needing significant production or distribution time) ensures that information is fresh and timely. Conducting an annual reader survey will help make the e-newsletter a “must-read” publication and authoritative source of information about GEDSB. Consider some of the following content for an employee e-newsletter:

- New policies and procedures that impact staff and students
- Explanation of board vision and progress toward goals
- Rationale behind decisions and follow-up on how feedback was used
- Answers to the most frequently asked questions by parents and the public
- Information on accountability standards and assessments
- Updates on projects or programs
- Strategic plan updates

- Governmental/legislative updates
- Background and resolution of school incidents
- Special events, activities and awards at school sites
- Recognition of employee work and achievements
- Celebrations of sensational customer service or good deeds
- Communication tips on sharing information with parents and the public
- Other information identified through the reader survey

It is essential that all employees—including part-time and casual staff—receive this e-newsletter emailed to them directly. It is also important to distribute print copies of any e-publications to those employees who do not have regular access to a computer.

- **Give the GEDSB mission, vision and goals a high profile.** A topic area of great importance to GEDSB is the mission and vision and progress toward strategic goals of its Multi-Year Plan (2011-2015). To ensure continued success, it is important that all employees clearly understand and focus their efforts on the strategic plan goals and priorities. It is important that you keep the vision “front and centre” in employee communications through regular progress reports on the work being done and by showcasing examples of how the efforts of employees (support staff as well as teachers) are connected to the success of students. In other words, they need to see themselves in the plan, and they need to understand their role in helping Grand Erie achieve its goals.

Internal focus groups said that they enjoy reading about success stories throughout the board. It would be helpful to link success stories to progress toward GEDSB’s strategic goals. On a regular basis, perhaps once or twice a month, email (or distribute on postcards) short, “good news” bullets to all staff. Limit these to one or two sentences and include a link to more information if needed. Encourage employees to share these messages within their personal networks of friends and family. By familiarizing themselves with the key message points, they will have a quick answer when others ask them, “What’s new at GEDSB?”

Some additional suggestions include:

- Provide regular updates and progress reports from the Director in the employee e-newsletter. Demonstrate what he has learned from his visits with schools. This might take the form of a Director’s blog, which would allow for a more personal, engaging communications approach.
- Provide principals and supervisors with updates to share at staff meetings.

- Have senior staff members visit schools to report to staff and take questions and answers about progress, successes and challenges.
- Continue to recognize employees who have made significant contributions to GEDSB goals. Explore ways to expand employee recognition within all employee groups and at all levels of GEDSB. The High Fives program seems to be effective and popular—leverage the face-to-face recognition by highlighting these staff members in the e-newsletter. Over time, a comprehensive program of employee recognition—including long-service awards in 5-year increments — should be implemented.
- **Increase opportunities for face-to-face communications.** There are many ways to provide information, but maintaining high levels of trust and good morale requires two-way communication. Research (including focus group feedback from this audit) shows employees prefer face-to-face communication from direct supervisors to memos and newsletters. We suggest that all administrators who plan and run meetings work to create more opportunities for discussion and interaction. An opportunity to dialogue and ask questions promotes better understanding of issues and problems and, in turn, creates better ambassadors for the schools.

Encourage principals and administrators to include support staff in staff meetings. . Focus group feedback indicated that support staff members often do not feel valued or respected in their roles. While it is not always easy for them to attend staff meetings due to work hours and responsibilities, making it possible for them to attend at least some meetings each year will reinforce their sense of being valued as contributing members of the school team. Along with school-related topics, principals should also cover important board information at meetings (*See the next two bullets*). Share key messages at all staff meetings (message cards could be distributed as well), so that everyone is clear and comfortable with their communication role.

The same is true for central board office staff. The Director or a designated administrator should schedule regular meetings with board office staff to update them on activities and issues around the board and provide opportunities for employees to ask questions. In addition, when departments share responsibilities or are working on joint projects, regular meetings should be held to increase “face” time and foster collaboration. In addition, regular staff meetings within departments should be an expectation. Similar to staff meetings at schools, they should include all staff and cover both department-specific updates, as well as board news. E-meeting technology such as teleconference or Adobe Connect should be used to include department staff at other locations. These meetings should be held at least monthly.

When possible, encourage central office staff to visit schools. This could be developed into a program in which every central office staff visits a school at least once during the year. This helps build relationships, and helps central staff understand the realities of the

internal clients they serve. Ideally, the staff will visit a school or person to whom they provide direct service. However, it is also a good opportunity for staff to learn about new programs, such as full-day kindergarten or Specialist High Skills Majors.

- **Encourage principals to include office staff in the communication loop.** School secretaries and other support staff are a critical part of the communication loop in any school system. They come in contact with numerous internal and external stakeholders every day. Each one of these interactions is an opportunity to enhance the connection between stakeholders and GEDSB. For these employees to function effectively in this role, it is critical for administrators and principals to funnel information to them on a regular basis. The following steps can be taken by principals and administrators to ensure that key office staff members have the information they need to do their jobs well:
 - The Communications Department should provide scripts and Q & A documents for front-line staff about key Board issues (e.g., ARCs, kindergarten registration).
 - Review daily and weekly schedules so that they are aware of activities going on in the school or department, as well as major events across the board.
 - Review deadlines for reports and other information required by central office or the Ministry.
 - Review the major issues being discussed in GEDSB so that they feel comfortable answering basic questions from parents.
 - Provide them with a copy of the GEDSB calendar, agendas of Trustees meetings, and other publications so they can answer questions and share information.
- Include them in planning meetings and discussions, when possible.
- **Develop a standard process for reporting the outcome of meetings involving staff.** Some focus group participants indicated they do not always get the information they need and the information they do get is sometimes inconsistent. Some school representatives are more conscientious about reporting back than others, so there is often a lack of consistency in the amount and quality of information distributed. One strategy for addressing the dissemination of information that can be used for any type of working meeting involves completing a simple action grid. At each meeting, designate someone to fill in the action grid and distribute it as soon as possible afterwards to all meeting participants so that the information can be cascaded to staff in a timely manner.

Email this grid to meeting participants, place it on the upcoming portal, and use it to report actions and outcomes from the meeting. A grid makes it easier to track the discussion as it takes place, eliminates the need for lengthy minutes and ensures that

you are consistently communicating information. You can also use copies of the grid to set the agenda for the next meeting.

A grid might look like this:

Item	Action/Discussion	Next Step	Responsibility	Deadline
EQAO Testing	Principals to parents	Draft Letter	Sam Smith	3/15/12
Key Communicator	Invitation Letter	Send Letters	Sally Brown	5/15/12

All board and school administrators should clearly understand the importance of their roles in communicating key information to employees in a timely manner and be held accountable for the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Evaluating administrators on communication can lead to more consistency in how information is delivered. However, for administrators and supervisors to communicate effectively, they must be included in the communication loop and receive all critical information of importance to board operations, and this simple grid helps ensure that everyone has the same information at the same time. It can also help expose communication gaps that occur when information flow is interrupted due to lack of follow-through.

- **Involve staff in decisions that affect them.** Staff morale can often hinge on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions must be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. This is particularly important for board administrators who must make decisions that affect the jobs of hundreds of people in school facilities throughout the board. For example, many participants in the staff focus groups said that they sometimes don't get the information they need to do their jobs in a timely fashion, or if they are asked for input, they don't hear back on the outcomes. These scenarios lead them to believe that they are asked for input, but "nobody is listening." Although gathering staff input will require extending decisionmaking timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. Once again, closing the communication loop is critical to assist in improving operations and morale.
- **Focus on building morale and teamwork in the Facilities Department.** Most internal focus groups raised concerns about the service provided by the Facilities department. Among the staff themselves, the morale and sense of teamwork seems to be particularly low. Though it is not uncommon in school boards for staff in Facilities to feel that they are "not the priority" and "not valued" in the organization, this issues in Grand Erie seem particularly significant.

- Some suggestions specifically for this staff group include the following:
 - Ensure that Facilities staff receive the materials about the Multi-Year Plan. Involve front line Facilities staff in creating personalized information that helps them understand what the plan means for them in their settings—what do they values look like in their day-to-day work, for example.
 - More frequent face-to-face meetings may be needed within this department . Facilities staff want to meet more often with their superintendent.
 - When Director Forbeck, or any superintendent visits a school, be sure to meet the Facilities staff.
 - Email is an effective way to communicate with Facilities staff. Bulletin board materials are also useful—but should be sent to them in hard copy.
 - Facilities staff need more of an opportunity for input into decisions that directly affect them. Staff need to feel that it is safe to provide feedback and they need to see genuine action taken—or receive an explanation of why their feedback was not used.
- Since this is a major area of concern within the system, we recommend this is a priority for GEDSB. A formal plan to improve communication in the Facilities department should be implemented and evaluated within a year to determine whether staff feel more empowered and valued.
- **Consider creating a Director’s Staff Advisory Council.** To integrate communications, improve internal relationships and gain a “big picture” view of employee issues and concerns, there may be value in establishing an advisory group made up of representatives from the schools and various central office departments.

This group could meet regularly with the Director and senior staff to provide input on topics under consideration in GEDSB. This would give each employee group and department an opportunity to evaluate how decisions will affect them and offer solutions or alternatives “from the trenches” for addressing problems or improving procedures. It would also provide a venue for promoting understanding of jobs and responsibilities among employee groups and build a stronger team sensibility. This type of advisory council offers a way to involve employees at the beginning rather than the end of the decision-making process so that they feel their input is valued.

Another option is to hold a monthly staff breakfast or lunch meeting. Invite a random group of 10-15 employees to the board offices (or to a school) to meet informally with the Director. The goal should be to solicit feedback from staff members on what is going well at the schools and what areas need to be improved. Employees have a chance to provide input, and the Director gains valuable insight into challenges and successes around the board. By keeping the group relatively small, it ensures that everyone has a chance to comment and no one is intimidated by speaking in front of a

larger group. The meetings should be held to one hour and a staff member assigned to take notes so that the Director can focus on listening to the participants.

- **Develop a Management Memo for school communications.** We recommend that GEDSB develop a process to consolidate operational communications from board departments to the schools before they are distributed. One technique that has worked for other school systems is a consolidated Management Memo. This is a compilation into a single weekly communication of routine information from all board departments. A top-level administrator or executive assistant should be responsible for compiling and condensing information into topic areas (i.e., testing, facilities maintenance, professional development, etc.). Many school systems find that this technique can eliminate dozens of separate memos each week and save many minutes of the principals' valuable time. The key is coordinating the distribution of memos and information up front. Aligning communication to the schools in advance brings to light overlapping deadlines that are problematic for the schools and forces board departments to plan their work to better accommodate their "customers" – the schools. This memo will also be useful to department staff to learn about what is happening in other departments and can serve as one useful strategy to help break down silos.
- **Develop key messages/talking points for administrators/teachers on key topics.** Create a calendar of times when schools are likely to be having events that bring parents into the schools—meet the teacher nights at the end of September, parent-teacher interviews, Christmas and spring concerts, Education Week. Provide talking points for principals and teachers, as they are meeting with parents. This is also an ideal time to distribute information to parents. For example, at a parent-teacher interview, the teacher can deliver one or two key messages about the Multi-Year Plan, then give the parent a one-page fact sheet about the plan.
- **Treat students as an internal audience and include student communication a component of all communication plans.** The school is the main focus of the educational experience for most students, but they are interested in Board information that pertains to them. They should be treated as an internal audience. The communication must be targeted to tweens and teens—they need to see how it is directly relevant to them. "Put more fun into it," one student advised. It's important to remember that students keep their parents informed about what is happening at school and in the school system—if they feel it is relevant. Ensuring that students are informed and engaged can be a vital strategy in engaging parents.
- Ways to communicate with students include the following:
 - Students rely on their teachers for information—provide key messages/talking points to teachers, especially at middle and secondary school levels.
 - Student announcements are an effective way to reach students. Provide schools with scripts for PA announcements. Create PowerPoint slides for the schools

whose announcements are presented on TV monitors. Leverage the student announcements by packaging them into an email update for parents.

- School hallways provide ample space for posters.
- Ask student councils to distribute the information. This will be particularly effective for those councils who host their own Facebook page.
- Use social media to reach students. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were recommended by the students. Students do not find their school websites useful, but teacher homework pages are highly used. These homework pages are another place to post key information.
- Recruit and train student “ambassadors” to assist Grand Erie in communicating to students. These students could be selected to receive special leadership training—they should be chosen to represent the cross-section of the school, rather than merely selecting the traditional leaders. They can serve as a conduit for two-way communication between GEDSB and students.
- Communicate the Multi-Year Plan to students in a way that is relevant and meaningful to them. Help them understand how it relates to them.
- Provide Board communication vehicles for students to share news about their school with the wider GEDSB system and communities—for example, student hosted events, fundraisers, etc.
- **Create internal “toolkits” when new policies/initiatives are introduced.** When a new policy or initiative is introduced, administrators and staff feel that often each school is “reinventing the wheel.” Provide a toolkit with resources such as the following:
 - Newsletter or website articles;
 - PowerPoint visuals and script, to present the policy to staff;
 - Templates;
 - Effective practices;
 - Teaching and learning resources—videos, lesson plans, interactive materials;
 - The ability to collaborate with colleagues from other schools.
- This type of toolkit would ideally be located on the intranet, where resources can be added as they are developed, and staff from different locations can upload examples of what they are doing, discuss issues they are facing, share ideas, etc.
- **Evaluate patterns of email use.** Most of the staff focus groups said email was among their preferred sources for delivering and receiving information, but also expressed concern about the volume of email they receive. We recommend GEDSB evaluate current use patterns for email in the schools and board offices and involve staff and parent representatives (as end users) in developing guidelines for keeping email and voice mail

communications manageable (*See Recommendation 3*). These should address such issues as:

- Reasonable response times for returning calls and emails from parents and other board departments (i.e., within 24-48 hours).
- Expectations for the use of communication tools, such as limiting “all user” messages and non-essential information, limiting the length and number of attachments, etc.

Recommendation 6:

Develop a comprehensive visual identity program and branding/marketing strategy.

The Executive Council identified the need for a consistent visual identity for the entire Grand Erie school system. Grand Erie print materials are generally well designed, but the visual identity is fragmented — for example, the Pathways to Success website and print materials. At the school level, the visual identity is further fragmented.

The decision made by the Board of Trustees to hire a Graphic Designer/Website Coordinator is commended. Creating the new position of graphic designer is an opportunity to begin to introduce a consistent visual identity program. Understand that this is a long-term and ongoing process. However, the visual identity program should include visual identity standards, along with templates that all users can easily access on the intranet. The graphic designer can also provide training to high-frequency users such as secretaries and those who make presentations, publications, etc.

Executive Council is also concerned about declining enrolment projections and the number of students who leave the Grand Erie system in the transition from grade 8 to grade 9. Executive Council members recognize that targeted communication/marketing has the potential to increase student enrolment.

We recommend that Grand Erie strengthen its approach to “branding” and marketing itself and its schools. There is no doubt that schools must compete for students in today’s environment, even though it is unfamiliar territory for public schools. A branding/marketing effort should focus not only on promoting a positive image and attracting new families and staff, but also on retaining families who are contemplating leaving the Grand Erie system for another local educational option.

More than a name, logo or tagline, strong brands are known for something unique — a promise of value that no other product or organization can claim in quite the same way with as much credibility. The goal of branding is to develop customer loyalty. In developing this marketing effort, Grand Erie must carefully consider how to most effectively expand current communication efforts to include this approach.

Support marketing efforts by research and focus on developing key messages, messengers and delivery methods for each target audience. For example, one target audience might be students and families who leave Grand Erie for secondary school. Before Grand Erie can market effectively to this group, it first

must research and understand why families are not choosing a Grand Erie secondary school. The following suggestions can help refine branding and marketing efforts:

- **Identify Grand Erie's unique strengths.** In all of the focus groups, there was no single strength that all groups identified, so work clearly needs to be done to define and communicate what Grand Erie has to offer.
- **Research what the competition is saying about itself.** How do you combat their proclaimed strengths which may play into your perceived weaknesses? Also look into registration and orientation dates. One school district was losing students because the competition's open houses were months ahead of theirs. They helped to solve the problem by moving their open houses and registrations dates to the same periods as their competition. Busy parents only have so much time to make decisions and most prefer to do all their "homework" about their selected schools at the same time.
- **Focus on clear, consistent messages.** The key to effective marketing is the development of key messages delivered in "one clear voice." The mission, beliefs, vision and values could be a first level of key messages—ideally, all Grand Erie staff should be able to tell a neighbour or friend what the board's mission is. By focusing on a few clear, memorable messages that are delivered by everyone in the system in a variety of ways, these messages begin to "stick" as the board's brand.
- **Define and assess the "customer service" experience in Grand Erie.** Effective marketing is based on solid programs that meet customer expectations. What is the customer service experience for Grand Erie parents and others? The level of quality customer service in each school and department should be assessed. For example, do calls bounce from department to department or does every staff member "own" the caller's question or problem, even if it doesn't fall under his or her area of responsibility? Is voice mail used to shield staff from the public? Are all calls or emails answered within a reasonable time frame? How are queries tracked, and by whom? How do you know when balls have been dropped or if consistent answers are being given to the same questions, especially if different departments are called? How long does it take from an initial request for an information packet to fulfillment?

It can also be helpful to evaluate the first impressions that visitors get when calling or visiting a school. While employees are well intentioned, visitors or callers can easily develop a negative perception based on how a phone is answered or the "curb appeal" of the school building. Some school systems use "secret shoppers" to conduct a review of how visitors are approached, whether the school presents a welcoming façade and how problems are handled. Once a school has been evaluated, we recommend that school councils or other teams of staff and parents be engaged to help with addressing problems identified and making specific suggestions about how to improve the "first impression" environment in the school. NSPRA can provide a first impression checklist for you, if warranted.

And, since “What gets measured gets done,” we recommend that customer service and communication measures become part of job evaluations for managers, supervisors and administrators.

- **Evaluate marketing needs and identify target audiences.** Grand Erie needs to determine:
 - What you are marketing (what messages you want to send)
 - Who the target audiences are
 - How you can most effectively deliver the messages (what communication vehicles will be used)
 - When the best time is to deliver the messages
- What results you expect from the marketing effort
- **Begin by increasing communication and marketing for two critical entry points into the Grand Erie system** — kindergarten registration and grade 8-9 transition.
- **Increase kindergarten registration by engaging parents in the pre-school years:**
 - Elementary schools can partner with local child care centres to share resources — for example, invite the centre to join the school for special performances aimed at primary students. Make these opportunities available to stay-at-home parents and other caregivers as well.
 - Partner with public libraries and other community organizations who serve preschool children and families. These partnerships could include information sharing, making school space available for meetings, presentations/workshops by Grand Erie staff about getting ready for school, etc.
- **Engage students and parents to promote Grand Erie secondary schools as the schools of choice.** Many focus group participants mentioned the range of programs in secondary and the strong Pathways focus as a major area of strength. Build on that strength to boost secondary enrolment.
- **Create occasions for families to visit the local secondary school throughout their child's elementary years,** so they are familiar with the school and feel comfortable there. These occasions could include a concert, play or other showcase of the accomplishments of the high school students.
- Most parents are apprehensive about their child's transition to high school. **Provide a “getting ready for high school” toolkit for parents and students.** This could be web-based and include tips, lists of programs to choose from, FAQs, school council contacts — so parents can speak directly with another parent and other resources. Topics of interest might include the following:
 - Help smooth the transition from grade 8 to grade 9

- Help your teen choose high school courses
- How to help your child start career life planning
- Types of high school courses
- Parenting a teenager
- A guide to special education programs and services
- How to help your teen with homework
- **Create peer-to-peer communication materials for grade 8 students as they get ready for grade 9, since they will influence the decision of the school they will attend for high school.** Social media networks can be especially effective. For example, the high school's student council could create information specifically for grade 8 students to help welcome them. Blogs by grade 9 students about their experience in the first year of high school can help to dispel myths and concerns.
- **Develop guidelines for offering school tours.** Grand Erie should consider developing guidelines for offering school tours to community members, particularly parents of pre-schoolers and new residents. A school tour and visit is a tremendous opportunity to connect with neighbourhood residents and prospective families to promote the benefits of Grand Erie schools.
- **Develop an exit survey for families leaving the district.** An exit survey and procedure should be developed to administer to all parents who take their children out of Grand Erie schools. This should be a short survey, designed to determine why they are leaving, where they are going and what they expect from their new school. Parents could be asked to fill it out at the time they withdraw their child, or it may be sent to exiting parents from their school principal.

Develop an additional survey to administer to parents who re-enroll their children in a Grand Erie school after exiting. These surveys will provide information on the perceptions that lead parents to leave Grand Erie and what realities they experience in other programs that brings them back. With this information, Grand Erie can build messages into its on-going communication program that will combat misperceptions and create positive comparisons for the schools. This survey data is essential for creating an effective marketing program for the schools. The data could also provide information on programs Grand Erie might consider which would keep students in its schools. It may also be useful to develop exit surveys for staff as well if they don't already exist.

- **Consider future collaborative efforts with regional municipalities and business leaders to create awareness of Grand Erie as a preferred arrival destination for newcomers to Canada.** With declining enrolment projected for the foreseeable future, one way to recruit new students is by looking to the newcomer population. Canada's net population growth in the next 40 years is expected to come mainly from immigration.

Newcomers also bring welcome business investment capital to the region. A large segment of newcomers to Canada arrives in Toronto and Vancouver because those are large cities that prospective newcomers are more likely to have heard about. Many remain in those regions, because they settle with their families and prefer not to relocate again. Therefore, one strategy to attract more newcomers is to create awareness of Grand Erie as a preferred arrival point for newcomers. If they chose Grand Erie as their first arrival destination in Canada, they are more likely to settle and remain in the area.

- **Work with local municipalities and other organizations in the Grand Erie catchment area (on a campaign to position the Grand Erie region as a destination of choice when newcomers settle in Canada.** Conduct some research to determine the key marketing messages that would appeal most to prospective newcomers. The lifestyle of the region, along with proximity to Ottawa and Quebec, may prove important “selling” features.

- Information package and DVD for overseas visa officers – Create an information package and DVD for Canadian visa officers who work in embassies around the world. This package would highlight Grand Erie as a region of choice for newcomer families and would provide information to visa officers that would enable them to recommend Grand Erie to people seeking visas. Create a DVD that visa officers could show to visa seekers that would highlight education, jobs and lifestyle opportunities in Grand Erie. Include testimonials from newcomers who have recently settled in Grand Erie. To obtain a list of Canadian visa offices, go to:

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/offices/missions.asp>

- Presentation to overseas visa officers – CIC brings overseas visa officers back to Canada each year for their annual meeting. Contact the CIC national headquarters to request an opportunity to make a presentation to the visa officers at their annual meeting. Highlight how to use the information package and DVD with those seeking visas to Canada and use it as an opportunity to make personal contacts with visa officers stationed in countries that would be a particularly good fit with the Grand Erie region. Contact:

Director, Integration and Refugees Program Delivery
Operational Management and Coordination Branch
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
365 Laurier Avenue West
Jean Edmonds Tower South, 14th Floor
Ottawa, ON

- **Attract newcomer families already in Canada to Grand Erie** – Newcomers who are willing to relocate within Canada are not choosing Grand Erie as their destination. Through the media, there is a perception that western Canada has abundant job opportunities, but there are also drawbacks there for newcomers, such as extremely high housing costs and the lack of rental availability. The climate in western Canada may also be less than ideal for

many newcomers. There is an opportunity to create awareness about the benefits to newcomer families of considering relocating to Grand Erie. Modify an information package/DVD to target newcomer families already in Canada. Include testimonials from families who have relocated from the Greater Toronto Area to the Grand Erie region. Send this package to settlement agencies in the Greater Toronto Area, including the following:

- Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), www.ocasi.org
- Canadian Council for Refugees, www.ccrweb.ca
- COSTI Immigrant Services, www.costi.org
- Catholic Cross, www.cathcrosscultural.org
- Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services, www.safss.org/
- Presentation to settlement workers – CIC holds a national conference of settlement workers. Contact the CIC national headquarters to request an opportunity to make a presentation to the settlement workers at their annual meeting. Highlight how to use the information package and DVD with newcomer families and highlight the factors that make the Grand Erie region an ideal place to which newcomer families should consider relocating.

Recommendation 7:

Continue to improve relationships and partnerships with First Nations communities.

Recently, Grand Erie has taken major steps to improve its relationships with First Nations and the communities clearly appreciate the work which has been done. One of the big steps has been the Director of Education taking the First Nations portfolio. To the First Nations community, this is a visible demonstration of the board's commitment to the success of students. The board has also created two Aboriginal outreach positions. These positions have contributed significantly to building relationships and partnerships. The staff in these positions are seen as highly effective in their roles. The programs and services for First Nations students have had an impact on increasing the graduation rate and are viewed positively by the communities.

Goodwill, positive relationships and trust that have been built are a strong basis from which to continue to build partnerships. Within the First Nations communities, there is a genuine desire to work constructively with the board for the benefit of First Nations students. We encourage Grand Erie to continue moving forward in this spirit of partnership and inclusion. The recommendations below reflect what we heard from the First Nations communities — they can form a starting point for the continuing dialogue, but should be implemented in an inclusive manner, bringing the board and First Nations together as equal partners.

- Provide more opportunities to create understanding and awareness between Grand Erie staff and the First Nations.

- Mutual knowledge and understanding is essential to help move forward productively. Despite the progress that has been made, there is still a lack of understanding in the Grand Erie system about the First Nations communities.

The following are suggested ways to continue to build awareness and understanding:

- Hold at least one board meeting per year at Six Nations.
- Add Aboriginal content into all aspects of the curriculum at all grades — this is valuable learning for all students, not only those of Aboriginal heritage. Use resources such as the provincial *First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* and related resources such as the *Aboriginal Perspectives* teacher toolkit, as well as the expertise of the local First Nations.
- Offer First Nations language courses in high schools. Though it is challenging to find teachers qualified to teach these courses, creative solutions can be found in partnership with the First Nations communities.
- Encourage more students of all backgrounds to participate in Native Studies courses in secondary school.
- Devote some time in board-wide PD days to provide training for all teachers about Aboriginal culture. The training might be held at Six Nations and include a tour. It is essential for all teachers to have a common, shared understanding of First Nations history and culture.
- Provide opportunities for teacher exchanges between Grand Erie and Six Nations schools. Teachers who have spent a semester or a year teaching in a First Nations school would share their experiences in a variety of ways when they return to the Grand Erie system.
- Continue to develop partnerships to enhance relationships and better serve First Nations students and families.

The following are some suggested starting points for increasing partnerships that will be of mutual benefit to Grand Erie and the First Nations communities.

- Develop a process or protocol to streamline the development, approval, and implementation of new partnerships between Grand Erie and the First Nations communities. Consider creating a partnership table or similar structure that can foster and fast-track partnership projects.
- Provide more opportunities for partnerships between Grand Erie and First Nations teachers. For example, wherever possible, teacher PD organized by Grand Erie could be opened up to First Nations teachers. Consider organizing some jointly planned PD for both groups of teachers — some sessions taking place on Six Nations, some at Grand Erie locations.

- Develop partnerships that increase interactions between Grand Erie and Six Nations students. For example, provide an opportunity for Grand Erie students to attend the Six Nations immersion school to study for a semester in Mohawk or Cayuga.

There is a need to create more formal linkages between Grand Erie secondary schools and community-based services designed specifically to work with Aboriginal populations, to ensure that First Nations students receive the support they need. Examples include the following:

- Aboriginal public health nurses, sexual health nurses, addiction counselors need to be on-call to serve students in their high schools.
- First Nations students are often referred by secondary schools to non-Aboriginal services, because school staff are not aware of the culturally-specific community based services available on the First Nations. Examples of services available include tragedy response, police services, addiction and health sexuality counseling. Greater partnership and collaboration between Grand Erie and Six Nations services can help ensure that Aboriginal students receive the support they need.
- Grand Erie needs to work with Six Nations public health in the same it does with the public health department of the municipalities it serves to ensure that First Nations students receive required immunizations. Aboriginal students are sometimes expelled from school due to lack of required immunization, because the record is with the Six Nations public health department. If their immunizations are not up-to-date, they should be referred to Six Nations public health to have their immunizations, rather than off-reserve services.

Treat First Nations schools as part of the Grand Erie system from a communication and service perspective. Currently, there is a perception that First Nations schools and students are an afterthought. Instead, the board needs to treat First Nations schools as a *de facto* part of the Grand Erie system, since the students eventually come to Grand Erie schools.

- Set up First Nations schools with access to the Grand Erie email system. If possible, create special Grand Erie accounts for all First Nations school staff and set up the First Nations schools as locations within the Grand Erie email/technology infrastructure. The aim is to facilitate the ability of First Nations school administrators and teachers to connect with Grand Erie staff and vice versa. Access to Grand Erie staff directories—who does what—will also help the two systems work more effectively together. If possible, this access to information should be reciprocal.
- Encourage and facilitate more direct communication and relationship building at all levels between Grand Erie secondary schools who serve Aboriginal students and their First Nations “feeder schools.” Consider establishing face-to-face meetings (at least once yearly, more often if desired by both groups) of school administrators from Grand Erie and Six Nations to discuss issues of mutual interest/concern regarding student transition.

- Provide First Nations schools with a timeline about the transition process from grade 8 to grade 9—all of the key dates and milestones throughout the school year (information nights, open houses, deadlines for course selections). First Nations schools need to be able to coordinate information and interactions on behalf of parents. For example, providing more information about the secondary schools, to help parents and students make informed choices.
- Begin to collaborate on developing a formal transition plan for all First Nations students entering Grand Erie secondary schools — a formal way in which the school the grade 8 student is currently attending and the Grand Erie secondary school where the student will attend grade 9 can share information specific to the needs of each student. Processes and protocols that exist for grade 8-9 transition within Grand Erie should be leveraged, where possible or practical.
- Provide information about special education processes and programs. The special education program is particularly difficult for First Nations staff and families to navigate.
- Provide direct communication to First Nations parents and community.

Generally, First Nations parents and communities find it difficult to access information about the Grand Erie school system. Parents feel that communication from the secondary schools is very limited. Continued dialogue and relationship building is needed to keep the lines of communication open. The following are suggested strategies that can be implemented in the short-term.

- Partner with the band council to share information. The council's newsletter, *Council Briefs*, is sent to every household. A column in this newsletter with key dates and other essential information would be a valuable communication tool.
- Aboriginal counsellors can be key informants. They attend open houses at the First Nations schools at the beginning of the year. Consider a program that equips them with information on an ongoing basis to share with the First Nations community. Extend this key informant concept to others in the First Nations community who work directly with children and families.
- The Grand Erie website is seen as a useful information source, however less than half of First Nations families have internet access, so this cannot be relied upon as the only communication method. To increase effectiveness of access to the website, provide tips for families about ways to access the internet—e.g., Six Nations library.
- Communication technologies that work effectively for First Nations families include automated call-out systems and text messages. Use these technologies to increase direct communication with First Nations families, especially during the grade 8 year and throughout secondary school.

- Continue to engage in dialogue with the First Nations communities about how communication is working and ways to improve. This should be seen as a shared responsibility at different levels of GEDSB.

Recommendation 8:

Continue to develop and expand opportunities for engagement and feedback.

Trustees, Director Forbeck, and the Executive Council are committed to listening to staff, parent and community input as part of the decision-making process. However, most focus groups participants do not feel they have opportunities to provide input, nor do they perceive that their feedback is considered in the decision-making process. Many focus group participants expressed doubt as to whether their voices are truly “heard” by board leaders.

This perception appears to be driven in part by a lack of follow-through on Grand Erie’s part in closing the communication loop by informing staff and stakeholders on the outcomes of actions taken as a result of their input. These perceptions are indicative of the ongoing importance of the communication effort in building trust, confidence and a sense of shared responsibility for the schools among all stakeholders – internal and external. We strongly encourage Grand Erie to continue to develop and expand engagement efforts and include a communication component in order to address these concerns and strengthen relationships with the community.

The bottom line for all engagement efforts is to ensure that stakeholders are involved from the very beginning of the process and given meaningful work to do. Following any consultation effort, it is important to evaluate what worked and what didn’t in order to refine the process so that it works effectively and generates increased visibility and participation in the future.

As Grand Erie considers future consultations, another factor to consider is that not every decision requires an engagement process. Many factors need to be considered — such as the timelines for making a decision. Where needed, time should be built in to the decision-making process for consultation. When that is not possible, the consultation may not seem authentic to participants.

All internal and external stakeholders will judge the consultation by whether or not they see their voice reflected in the final decision. They do not depend that every suggestions they make will be implemented—rather, they wish to see a rationale if it was not possible to use the input provided. Executive Committee reports already contain this information. This information needs to be exposed—internal and external stakeholders seem unaware of it, so it should be profiled more clearly in communication to staff and on the Grand Erie website. Ideally, this information will also be sent directly to all those who provided input.

The first priority for improving feedback opportunities must be with internal stakeholders:

- **Involve staff in decisions that affect them.** Staff morale can often hinge on whether employees believe their concerns are heard and respected. When decisions need to be made that directly impact staff members, it is important to ask for their input in advance. Many participants in the staff focus groups noted that information trickles down to them after the fact—most do not feel they have opportunities for input or if they are asked, they don't hear back on the outcomes. Generally, the further down one goes in the Grand Erie hierarchy, the less opportunities exist for staff to provide direct input into decisions that affect their jobs. Although gathering staff input will require extending decision-making timelines, it can pay big dividends in building morale and pride in job performance. Putting in place regular internal channels of two-way communication will help to create a culture of consultation and collaboration in Grand Erie.

Some engagement strategies to consider for parents and the community include the following:

- **Hold study circles on “hot topics” affecting the board.** Study circles are facilitated groups that involve 10-15 people in discussions on a particular topic. They provide an opportunity to surface all sides of an issue as well as some underlying concerns that may impact the outcome. Study circles can be used very effectively for individual school issues as well. NSPRA can provide more information on coordinating study circles.
- **Consider holding periodic town halls or community forums.** Town hall or community forum meetings can be a way to hear from a larger number of people at one time. The key to successful and productive forums is to initiate them at the start of the decision-making process and to carefully structure the process so that input is recorded and the outcomes reported on to the public. It is important to remember that town halls and forums are not public hearings, but rather, opportunities for community members to participate in a dialogue with board leaders – to listen, speak, and more importantly, to be listened to. They are not intended to be confrontational but to create an environment that allows for civil discourse. Similar forums could also be held on a smaller scale for a local issue.
- **Provide opportunities for the public to have input that do not require attendance at a meeting.** Grand Erie's website includes a link that informs constituents on how to present comments to the board of trustees. The website also provides links to current surveys (consider moving the list of survey to the home page for easier access.) Consider expanding these options by offering a button on the home page that allows people to record their comments or reactions to a specific question or issue. This would provide another avenue for gathering input from stakeholders. Social media can also be used very effectively to expand input opportunities. For example, host a live chat or a Tweet-up (virtual meeting on Twitter). Allow residents to upload brief video comments

to the Board's YouTube channel on a topic on which you are gathering input. Elicit comments on Facebook and other social media channels.

- **Expand outreach to community leaders and develop collaborative partnerships with business and civic groups.** The focus group of business leaders believe that education is very important to the well-being of the entire community, and had a strong desire to be involved in finding solutions to challenges facing the schools. They were very supportive of Grand Erie but felt that it is often difficult for businesses to connect with the board. The group also noted that Grand Erie needs to do a better job reaching out to them; they felt community groups are more proactive in reaching out to the board than vice versa. A concerted effort to improve and facilitate communication and partnerships between business/civic leaders and Grand Erie could be very beneficial.

It may also be beneficial to expand outreach to business and civic leaders by establishing a Business/Community Advisory Council to assist in developing more collaborative projects with businesses and civic groups. This can help to increase involvement and build a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for student achievement and school success, strengthen relationships, build understanding of the needs of schools and business, and tap local expertise. Members would be invited to meet with Director Forbeck two or three times a year to discuss management, budget and resource challenges facing the board.

There is generally a view in the business community that school boards could operate more efficiently. This type of advisory council would become more knowledgeable about the actual fiscal situation in Grand Erie and can become effective advocates for the board with their colleagues and peers. This group could also serve as key communicators to the business community and help promote partnerships.

Business and civic leaders should be included on mail and email lists to receive board publications and key communicator updates. Another option is to create a special e-newsletter targeted to this group that contains short updates and information about topics of specific interest to them, such as budget and facilities issues, how Grand Erie is preparing students for the workforce, achievement test rankings, etc.

- **Connect early with families of kindergarten students and those new to the community.** As young students enter kindergarten, Grand Erie is also acquiring a large force of potentially enthusiastic and loyal supporters. The same is true for families newly relocated to Grand Erie. Reaching out to these families to welcome them demonstrates that Grand Erie is committed to working with them to make their children's educational experience a success.

Some school districts develop a program and team for reaching out to new and young families. Grand Erie could recruit veteran parents and SAC leaders to form a Grand Erie Parent Ambassadors Club to welcome newcomers to their schools. This can also be a great role for once-active parents whose children are now grown and out of the system, as it provides them with an opportunity to stay involved and mentor young parents. These "experienced" parents can serve as resource contacts and advisors while providing a peer connection to the schools.

Families new to the community should be provided with the “Welcome to School” package to help them navigate the Grand Erie schools system — the local school can add personalized information as well. This package might be provided electronically on school websites as well as, or instead of, paper.

- **Explore face-to-face options for new families.** Contact can be made via phone, or new families can be invited to a special orientation meeting at their school or at the board. This outreach can be particularly valuable for parents of special needs students, to help them access available services. School councils may be interested in helping schools and the board with these welcoming activities.
- **Continue to develop parent engagement opportunities.** Through the GEPIC and school councils, continue to offer a variety of strategies to engage parents. Evaluate the effectiveness of current strategies. Engagement is a continuum—look for ways to help move parents from less to more engaged. Use technology tools and/or social media to provide a forum for school councils to connect with each other. Provide genuine opportunities for dialogue with parents—an opportunity for them to express their views about a variety of issues that affect their children and participate in an ongoing conversation with GEDSB, rather than just pushing information out to them. Many parents, though not all, expect GEDSB to use social media channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to communicate with them.

Research shows that more than half of parents will become actively involved in their child’s school if they are directly asked/invited by someone they know — the principal, their child’s teacher, another parent. Schools will be more effective recruiting volunteers if they “advertise” specific volunteer jobs, rather than putting out general requests for help. Volunteer “jobs” should range from one-time to longer-term commitments; ideally, there should be after-hours or at-home tasks, in addition to ones that need to be done at school during school hours.

A barrier for involvement for many parents is the criminal record check. Helping parents navigate this requirement will increase the pool of those available to help in the school.

- **Focus parent engagement on ways they can help their child learn.** Research shows that parents are highly engaged in their children’s education at home through daily homework completion and discussions about what happened at school that day. For parents, engagement activities must be directly related to the way in which it helps the parent help their child. These include workshops on parenting, bullying, preparing for secondary or post-secondary transitions, learning about the board’s curriculum and how to help with homework. Make information about how to get involved easy to access by publishing it in board and school publications and on the websites. Research shows that one of the “gaps” in communication with parents is that schools too often forget to issue “invitations” for them to become involved. Make this a regular component of school communication with parents.

- **Hold “Coffee Conversations” in the community.** Another strategy that has worked well in some school systems is to offer a monthly opportunity for citizens to drop by a local community venue for informal conversation with trustees and/or administrators about the school system. Consider teaming up with a local coffee shop or restaurant to host the event. Set a regular time and day (i.e., every second Tuesday from 7 to 9 a.m.). Sporting events and hockey arenas are also popular hubs of community activity. Trustees and senior staff members could pair up and rotate attendance. Taking the school board to the public this way can often be an effective way to encourage engagement as it is less intimidating than asking the public to come interact on board “turf.” Starting with Haldimand and Norfolk communities can help break down the Brantford-centric perception of the board.

To be most effective, provide a structure for the conversations by designating topics – for example, the new Multi-Year Plan, how Grand Erie is working to improve EQAO scores, etc. The key is to meet with community members on their turf to listen to concerns they may have about issues impacting the schools. It should be clearly stated that these “listening” events are just that – no decisions will be made based on conversations that take place. They should be positioned as opportunities for the Board of Trustees and administration to gather opinion research and information.

A variation of this strategy is to engage staff members in monthly “Lunch and Learn” sessions with the superintendent and/or senior staff members. These meetings could be rotated among family areas and should include support staff as well as teachers.

- **Consider creating a Grand Erie Alumni Program.** Grand Erie could benefit from an Alumni Program to sustain long-term connections with graduates and involve them in activities that build pride and support for the schools. The achievements of Grand Erie graduates could be showcased on the website, in the board office and/or in the schools. Successful Grand Erie graduates could be a wonderful resource that the school system could reach out to and involve on a regular basis. In some school systems, alumni programs are linked to foundations and members are involved in student leadership programs and fundraising to provide scholarships or extracurricular programs.

What is critical to the success of any feedback strategy is the commitment to engage the public in dialogue, listening to input and recommendations, and taking action based on all the information gathered. While this does not mean everything discussed will be implemented, it does mean that such input will be considered in the context of how it furthers the board’s vision and goals, and that Grand Erie closes the communication loop to clearly inform stakeholders of how their feedback has helped shape decisions.

Recommendation 8:

Conduct communication training for staff.

One of the communication challenges noted by the focus groups is the need for more consistency in communication. This is especially significant because parents, students, and even most school-based staff, base their perception about Grand Erie on the communication they receive from their local school. This issue can be partially addressed by providing professional development designed to help staff members as well as administrators become effective communicators and ambassadors for Grand Erie. This is an important role for the communications department. When staff members are comfortable and confident in their role as communicators, overall communication is more effective and far-reaching and helps to build trust and credibility with all stakeholders in the community.

We understand that professional development training time is limited given the busy schedules of education staff. However, one component of a strategic communication plan is ensuring that staff members have the skills necessary to communicate effectively, so we strongly encourage Grand Erie to consider this need. We recommend that communication training be expanded to include all staff groups and that some training be mandatory. Some communications training opportunities to be considered include:

- **Mandatory media relations training** – We recommend that administrators receive annual training in media relations to develop and update their skills in delivering an effective message in an interview or during a crisis. This will help them feel more comfortable when they find themselves in a spokesperson role and ensure key messages are delivered effectively. When team members are trained and comfortable in their roles, crisis communication is more proactive, smooth and effective, which contributes to faster response and resolution.

In addition to a general media relations training session, professional development could also include the following:

- “Breakfast/lunch with the media” sessions, so that administrators have an opportunity to meet reporters who cover education in a relaxed setting before they face them in an interview situation. This is an opportunity for informal dialogue
- Pair administrators who have had media experience with those who are new in their roles or feel they need more support before dealing with the media. Provide them with resources, such as case studies and camcorders, so they can practice generating key messages and brainstorming possible media questions.

- Provide “on camera” practice and coaching in simulated interviews as part of media training.
- Provide copies of video, audio or print news stories following interviews so that the administrator can see the final product and reflect on what worked well and what to improve for next time.
- Provide time at superintendent or administrative meetings for principals who have done a media interview to share their experience and review what questions were unexpected, what worked well, etc.
- **Crisis communication and management** – It is clear that in today’s world school systems must be prepared at all times to deal with the unexpected. From terrorist threats to weather events to health epidemics, a current crisis plan is a must and employees need to receive training to understand their roles and function effectively in a crisis. There are many aspects to crisis management—preparation, response, communication, and post-crisis support. We recommend that Grand Erie make crisis response training a yearly activity.
- **Communication training for principals and managers** – Train school administrators and managers in the basics of site-based communication, including the importance of face-to-face communication with employees, employee engagement, how to run an effective meeting, presentation skills, how to develop a communication plan for their school, how to engage parents, how to market their school. For department supervisors and managers, customer service training would also be an essential component. Consider making this a mandatory component of leadership training for GEDSB.
- **Developing school and classroom communication plans and training** – We recommend that a component of Grand Erie’s strategic communication plan include the development of template school communication plans that tie directly to the Multi-Year Plan and the board communications plan. These templates can be fairly simple and straightforward and should be designed to deliver key messages and measure the success of school-level communications. Individual classroom plans can also be developed that support the schools’ and board’s communication goals. Providing training for school administrators will help schools to personalize the template plan to the needs of their staff, students and parents. NSPRA’s *Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy* guidebook and accompanying CD provides practical tools and tips for teachers that may be of use in Grand Erie.
- **Newsletter design and content** – School newsletters are a key way in which parents receive news about their child’s school. Whether printed or produced as an e-newsletter, or both, it is important that the school newsletter is as effective as possible. Training in the use of templates, basic layout and design techniques, effective use of type fonts, graphics and color for staff members responsible for producing the

newsletters would ensure greater readability and consistency across the board and help the schools make their publications a “must read” for all parents. Information about how to evaluate the effectiveness of their newsletter is essential. Schools could also gain ideas about how to leverage their newsletters to other interested audiences—for example, posting their newsletter on the school website, mailing or emailing the newsletter to interested community members, local business, school partners, etc.

- **Use of social media to engage students and parents** – Many schools have already begun to use social media to engage and communicate with students, parents and the community. School staff will benefit from training about the many different new media available and ways to use social media effectively. School staff who are currently leaders in the use of social media can be peer experts in this type of training.
- **School websites, teacher web pages, school intranets** – School staff identified the need for more support to effectively manage their school websites. Training can be an integral part of the plan to transition school websites to board control. Workshops for teachers can also help them make better use of their class/homework pages. As the SharePoint intranet is implemented, training for schools and departments about how to use the collaboration tools is also essential. This training should be planned jointly by Communications and IT. School administrators who are currently leaders in this area could help to deliver the presentations and provide other peer-to-peer communication.
- **Each training activity should include an evaluation for participants to complete**, with questions to determine the impact of the training. Additional topics for training should also be gathered in a variety of ways, including via workshop evaluations.

For each type of training, consider offering some sessions in other areas of the board, rather than expecting participants to always come into Brantford. As well, explore technology options such as Adobe Connect, WebEx and GoToMeeting to offer remote access and archive options for staff who cannot attend in person. Video podcasts and web-based training should also be considered.

Recommendation 9:

Staff orientation and HR communication training.

Focus group participants advised that more effort needs to be placed on training for new staff members and those who are promoted into new jobs. They told us that there are no orientation sessions on completing the paper work for HR and no sessions for the explanation of benefits, operational procedures, or time to ask questions about their employee benefits. Lack of these basic HR sessions just creates a need for more calls to the HR office for explanations on forms or situations related to employee issues.

The “sink or swim” approach to job orientation also was seen as inefficient and led to less than productive atmosphere in starting a new job for GEDSB.

Recommendations include:

New Employee Orientation

- Gather new employees at the beginning of the year for an orientation session so they can learn about GEDSB, the HR requirements and see the people with whom they will be working in HR. In some sense, you are making the HR Poster come alive, and it gives new employees an opportunity to ask questions about policies and procedures related to their employment.
- You may also want to offer these sessions a few additional times throughout the year depending on the amount of new hires throughout the year. An alternative would be to capture the meeting in a video format and place it on your portal to be reviewed by new employees and others throughout the year.
- At the orientation sessions, it would also be most appropriate for the Director and Superintendents to give a brief welcome and demonstrate how pleased they are in adding new members to GEDSB. It would be great time to talk briefly about the 2011-2105 plan and its accomplishments to date.
- Other departments would present a brief overview of the services they provide, along with a “who does what” poster/handout similar to the HR resource. This would help new employees understand how the Board functions and help them in the future when they have to make contact with various departments. The departments could also be introduced to new employees through a “trade show”—with each department creating and staffing a booth to showcase its services.
- The manager of communications could also give a brief highlight of the employee communication vehicles available to them including the responsibility of all employees to review key e-newsletters on a regular basis as part of the responsibilities of their new job.

Job Specific Orientation

- Time needs to be spent with employees as they approach a new job at all levels of employment. Either the employee’s supervisor or designee should spend time in coaching and mentoring the replacement for the vacant position. A bit of upfront coaching can save time and frustration and eliminate or reduce costly mistakes that may now be evident in the “sink or swim” approach to job placement. There should be

Board-wide standards for site-based orientation, to ensure a consistent experience for employees new to the board or new to their job.

Employee Handbook

- All employees should have access to an employee handbook. It should provide the information presented in the orientation, as well as additional information identified by the HR department and by staff. This should be an online handbook on the intranet. If it is created as a wiki, it can easily be kept up-to-date, and departments can add to it as needed. Other resources, such as FAQs, can be built over time—staff members can submit questions to be answered, for example.

Recommendation 10:

Initiate a (Insert Community) Puts the Grand in Grand Erie Program

- Focus group participants were quick to note that even though many years have passed since amalgamation, there is still a strong undercurrent and culture of “my-community/school-opia” when staff, parents and other residents talk about GEDSB. “They” still do not see themselves as one board and often indicated that the “old way” was better because they felt more in touch with the decision makers at every level. Fourteen years after amalgamation, Grand Erie’s internal culture still remains fragmented—with strong allegiances to the former Norfolk and Haldimand school systems. Many staff feel that “things were better before amalgamation” and that “three-way marriages rarely work.” The work of unify Grand Erie into one cohesive organization is not yet complete.
- We also heard the term “Brantford-centric” frequently in our discussions. Finding ways for residents and staff of Brantford, Norfolk County, the County of Haldimand, and First Nations to see themselves as one Grand Erie organization is communication challenge.
- Much work needs to be done to start changing the perception of separate and not equal when talking about the communities of GEDSB. NSPRA has assisted school districts in the states by developing a “No Community Left Behind” program. Elements of that type of program could easily be adapted for Grand Erie as well. For this report, a working title of “_____ Puts the Grand in Grand Erie” is being used, but we recommend that your Manager of Communications work with others to actually name this program, if you choose to implement it.

Some elements of a campaign to address this issue could include the following strategies.

- **Focus on one community at a time.**

In addition to the above ongoing communication effort, another consideration for some communities is to provide the opportunity for designated areas to come together to discuss the future of their community. Since the culture of your board seems to revolve around local communities as well as the schools, you may want to join with a major co-sponsor, such as a media outlet or a major corporation in your area, to offer a series of “open conversations” in each area to discuss quality of life issues in those communities.

- What’s important to the citizens in those communities?
 - What do they expect from their communities?
 - What do they expect from their schools?
- How can we all work together to make all government bodies collaborate on mutually beneficial issues?
- Our experience indicates that it would be best to work with the chief operating officers and managers and not the elected officials to begin any collaborative venture with the government agencies. NSPRA has assisted school districts in the states by developing a “No Community Left Behind” program. Elements of that type of program could easily be adapted for Grand Erie as well. For this report, a working title of “_____ Puts the Grand in Grand Erie” is being used, but we recommend that your Manager of Communications work with others to actually name this program, if you choose to implement it.

The program would emphasize citizens’ well-being in their communities and not place major responsibilities or duties on the school. However, it would establish the GEDSB as an advocate for better life in these communities and open up dialogue about the importance of the schools to those involved. NSPRA can provide some additional information on the “community conversation” format if you need it.

- **Reach and inform government leaders.**

In today’s political climate, it is important for school district leaders to develop good working relationships with elected local officials. While most are well intentioned, many have not interacted with a school in years and often have inaccurate perceptions about the challenges that educators face daily. Suggestions for reaching out to elected officials and connecting them more directly to what is happening in the classroom include the following:

- **Develop an e-newsletter for all government officials.** It could contain major updates, future agenda items, and opportunities for feedback with each issue. It must be substantive and just not a fluff piece about GEDSB.

- **Create an “Adopt a Leader” program.** Have a school from their area of representation “adopt” each elected official. Schools should invite the top officials to all special events and encourage them to participate in the school as a guest reader or tutor or to play a role in student recognition events, such as by presenting awards at assemblies. The goal should be to let the official see today’s schools in action.
- **Invite government officials to teach a class.** Ask officials to teach mini-lessons in the schools on such subjects as how the city government works, public service, etc.
- **Invite officials to shadow principals or teachers for a day.**
- **Have superintendents become more visible and engage the leaders from their areas.**
- **Develop outreach programs to neighborhoods, churches, and community organizations to distribute information and gain feedback about issues affecting families.** Many ethnic and cultural groups are more open and responsive when approached in environments where they are most comfortable, such as church or home. Seek ways to reach out to families and build strong connections to the schools. Using community liaisons or partnership programs who work directly with families is one strategy for communicating face to face with parents that has been effective in other districts.
- **Highlight staff and students from every community as frequently as possible.**
- **Hold more meetings, professional development and other activities in communities other than Brantford.**
- **Consider holding at least one event annually to bring together all Grand Erie staff in a unifying event.** This event might be held the week before the start of school or on one of the regional PD days. It could focus in part on the Multi-Year Plan, to help deepen everyone’s understanding of the plan, but an equally important purpose would be to bring staff together through motivational speakers and activities to focus on their shared mission, values and purpose and to help them connect to Grand Erie rather than just their local and historic affiliations.
- **Create a staff working group to brainstorm and implement unifying staff activities throughout the year.**
- **In your various e-newsletters, highlight the home town of employees who receive recognition by GEDSB.**
- **Start a profile section in your e-newsletters highlighting staff at every level.** Most of our participants seemed to assume that all the administrative leaders were from Brantford—which is far from reality.

- **Hold a triggering event like the Best of GEDSB showcase mentioned in the observation section and include participation from every community and every school.** Publicize how the wonderful diversity is making GEDSB a richer and more complete school board.

Recommendation 11:

Considerations for Staffing and Implementation

We have covered a broad spectrum of communication and marketing needs with the recommendations in this *Communication Audit Report* and it would be unrealistic to expect the communications department to undertake many of these items immediately. This report contains recommendations that cover what we consider to be a strategic communication/marketing program and certainly more than can be accomplished with the current 2.5 staff in the near future. It is important to keep this in perspective so that the work outlined does not seem overwhelming at the start. As mentioned earlier in the report, we will be happy to discuss the recommendations with you to help set priorities for your program.

In our focus groups, we have heard only positive feedback from focus group participants on the communications department's responsiveness and professionalism.

To eventually implement the audit recommendations and fulfill the strategic goal to improve communication, however, we believe that senior staff and the trustees must consider committing more personnel and resources to the communications department.

Just what that commitment should look like is a local decision. Either through contracted services or new employees, the areas needing most assistance are in:

- e-communication (writing, layout, and technical expertise),
- direct support to schools (supporting school and teacher websites and creating template communication materials) and
- some organizational/clerical support to meet the demands of the new opportunities outlined in this report.

It may be a fruitful exercise for the Manager to track his time allocation by task for two "normal" weeks to see just how much time is spent on some of the organization and clerical duties currently being completed by him. Better use of expertise will make for a stronger program for GEDSB.

Another way of boosting staff is to look at school-level communications being managed by principals and vice-principals. Each school can also create a communication team of staff and parents to assist the school communication specialist with newsletters, websites, surveys, staff celebration and recognition activities, and other events. In any successful communication program, it is important that all employees recognize and understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools.

GEDSB might also consider devoting some resources from other budgets, such as the *Student Success: Learning to 18* funding, earmarked specifically for marketing communication aimed to bolster student enrolment.

It is also important to remember that professional development should also be a part of the growth of the communications department. The staff in the communications department must continue to participate in strategically focused professional development, so they continue to grow professionally. With a small department of communications professionals in a large board, it is easy to become isolated from the larger professional community by the day-to-day demands of the job. For this reason, the Director and the trustees must actively support professional development opportunities for communications staff. This support takes the form both of budget and of time allocated specifically for professional development activities.

We recommend that each member of the communications team complete an annual professional learning plan, which identifies their strengths, areas of professional interest and the learning goals and activities they plan to complete. This plan should be strategically connected to the communication needs of the board, as well as the range of professional competencies needed in the department.

We recommend that the manager of communications complete his professional accreditation in public relations (APR) in the next 3 years. This professional designation is an important professional milestone for the individual, but also provides greater credibility to the work of the department. The ultimate goal should be to have all communicators in the department accredited, and other members of the team should address in their annual learning plan how they are working towards that goal.

Other professional learning activities might include the following:

- Continue to attend the annual NSPRA Seminar.
- Join IABC or a CPRS chapter and attend at least two PD activities per year.
- Access NSPRA Power Hour sessions and web-based training offered through organizations such as IABC, CPRS and Ragan Communications.
- Access online resources such as NSPRA communities of learning portal and ragan.com for access to wide range of communication resources and to network with peers.
- Since communications is such a collaborative profession, the Communications Manager is encouraged to connect with other PR colleagues in the region for professional support and networking. Consider creating a mastermind group of strategic communicators in other sectors within the Brantford. Meet monthly to share ideas.

Recommendation 12:

Miscellaneous things to consider

Every audit report includes a few minor, but important, recommendations that do not fit under any major headings. Here are yours:

- The inconsistency factor reported primarily by parent groups and some internal staff is the weak link of your communication effort. The principals' survey completed for this audit shows some inconsistencies in the building-level approach to communication. Communication responsibilities and standards must be met. Evaluation of communication responsibilities for all appropriate employees is a measurement that needs to be taken. Until most staff begin performing consistently, your total communication effort will have holes in it.

- **Launch subscription-based/opt-in newsletters.**

Even though this was touched upon in our e-communication recommendation, it bears repeating. The approach to offer opt-in e-newsletters where selected groups of constituents — parents, business leaders, partners, key communicators, etc. They receive an e-newsletter emailed to their computers at work or home and also receive them on their smart phones. By using this approach, you do not have to wait for your audiences to go to your website. In this fashion, you are pushing the information directly to them.

Normally, a section is carried on your website, announcing the subscription /opt-in free process along with descriptions of the e-newsletters you will be offering. Some districts use this process to communicate the agenda for the board meetings, the board wrap-up, and budget updates during the “budget season.” New e-newsletters are also sent to a Key Opinion Leader Network and special groups of importance related to your strategic plan. Constituents can also use RSS feeds to their online devices.

- **Publication Review**

Overall, your publications are very attractive and readable. That is high praise as that is not often the case in our audit reports. They are consistently very good. After you review the recommendations in this audit report, it may be time to look at them a bit differently for their purpose and effectiveness. Again, you may want to consider converting some of them to e-publications. NSPRA will be happy to discuss those options with you once you have digested the full audit report.

- **Employee Awards Program**

Celebrating employees at all levels and making sure that such awards and celebrations are contained in your internal communication vehicles could also be a new communication initiative for Grand Erie. Consider reviewing the current structure for awards and investigate forming an awards advisory committee to help steer the types of awards to be given each year. Recognition of staff at levels is often a hallmark of an effective communication program.

- **Grand Erie Learning Alternative**

The Communications Department needs to work with the Grand Erie Learning Alternatives to align its programming and also support a communications campaign to support students who are not in traditional classroom settings or who wish to re-engage back into school. This effort could serve as another unifying force for the total Grand Erie School District Board.

Appendix

- **NSPRA Communication Audit Questions**
- **What Is NSPRA?**
- **Auditors' Vitae**

NSPRA Communication Audit Questions

**NSPRA Communication Audit
Grand Erie District School Board**

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the Grand Erie School Board?
 - How do you think your neighbors and others in the community would describe it?
2. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Grand Erie District School Board?
 - Are there areas that could be improved?
3. When it comes to communication, what does the board do well?
 - How can it be more proactive in communicating with you?
 - Has the system done a good job communicating about important issues facing education?
 - Where does it most need to improve communication?
4. What is your primary source of news and information about the schools and the board?
 - Is information about the board and schools easy to find and access?
 - If you have questions or want specific information about the schools, where or to whom do you go first to find it?
 - What information would you like to receive that you don't get now?
5. What is the best way for the board and schools to get important information to you?
 - What communication vehicles are most accessible/effective for you?
 - Is information delivered in a timely manner?
 - Does your school have a regular newsletter? Does it provide the information you need?
 - I have some board publications here (i.e., samples). Have you seen them?
 - Are they helpful and informative? How can they be improved?
 - Would you be interested in receiving text message alerts on your cell phone in the event of a school emergency?
 - If the board had a Facebook page would you use it to access current news and information? Would you be interested in receiving current news updates on Twitter?
 - Are there other social networking or web-based tools that you would like the board to consider including in its communication effort?
6. What information do you typically go to the board website to find?
 - What other information is it important for the website to include?
 - What would make it more useful to you as a primary source of information?

7. *(For staff)* As an employee, is the information you need communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
- What additional information would you like to receive?
 - What's the best way to communicate with you?
8. Do you feel school board leaders provide opportunities for consultation and for you to express your views and have input into important decisions?
- If not, how can school board leaders best provide opportunities for you to have a voice?
 - Do you feel school board leaders listen to input from the community and staff and consider it before making decisions?
 - What indicators would let you know that your input is valued?
9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Principals/Administrators

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the Grand Erie School Board?
- How do you think parents and others in the community would describe it?
2. What do you consider to be the strengths of the Grand Erie District School Board?
- Are there areas that could be improved?
3. When it comes to communication, what does the board do well?
- How can it be more proactive in communicating with you?
 - Has the system done a good job communicating about important issues facing education?
 - Where does it most need to improve communication?
4. What is your primary source of news and information about the board and schools?
- Are there social networking or web-based tools that you would like the board to consider including in its communication effort (i.e., Facebook, Twitter)?
5. As an employee, is the information you need accessible and communicated to you in a timely manner so that you can be effective in your job and as an ambassador for the schools?
- What additional information would you like to receive?
 - Are current internal communication vehicles such as (name examples) effective in delivering information?
 - What is the best way for board leaders to communicate with you?
6. What information do you typically go to the board website or intranet to find?

- What other information is it important for the website/intranet to include?
7. Do you feel you have opportunities to provide input and express your views to board leaders?
- How can the board best provide those opportunities?
8. Do you feel board leaders listen to input from the community and staff when appropriate and consider it before decisions are made?
9. What is the greatest communication challenge facing the school system in the future?
10. What assistance do you need to improve communication at your school or department?

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Board of Trustees Members

1. In only one or two words, how would you describe the board?
- How do you think parents and others in the community would describe it?
 - What do you believe the board needs to do to strengthen its image and relationships with the community?
2. What are you most proud of as a board member of Grand Erie District School Board?
- What one thing do you believe is most in need of improvement?
3. From your perspective, in the area of communication, what does the board do well?
- How can it be more proactive with communication?
 - How else can communication be improved?
4. Which of the district's current communication vehicles (i.e., the website, or publications) do you think are most effective in delivering the board's message? Why?
5. What do you see as the Board of Trustees' role in communication?
6. How might the board better engage parents, staff and community in helping address issues and challenges facing the board and schools?
- Are there other collaborative, community-oriented activities that would help the board achieve this goal?
 - Do you feel opportunities are now provided for people to have input and express their views on important decisions?
 - What keeps people from becoming more involved in the schools?
7. What other communication challenges do you see the board facing in the future?

Focus Group Discussion Questions for Secondary Student Group

1. What do you like most about your school?
2. What has been the best part of your high school experience so far?
3. What could the school do better to improve your high school experience?
4. Think back to when you were a freshman – what do you wish you had known when you first started high school?
5. How do you learn about what’s going on at school?
6. What is the best way for the school and board to communicate with students?
7. As a student, what information is most important for you to receive from the school and the board?
8. Do you ever visit the school website? The board website?
9. What does the board need to tell people in the community about your high school?

What Is NSPRA?

Since 1935, the National School Public Relations Association has been providing school communication training and services to school leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and the U.S. Dependent Schools worldwide. NSPRA's mission is to advance education through responsible communication. We accomplish that mission through a variety of diverse services that we provide to our members and to other school leaders who contract with or purchase products from us.

With over 70 years of experience, we have a reputation in the field for practical approaches to solving school district and agency communication problems. We have useful communication products, offer workshops and seminars, maintain resource and research files, have contacts and resources within the corporate communication industry, and have 34 chapters throughout the country that provide local networking opportunities for members.

In keeping with our mission, NSPRA provides workshop assistance to school districts, state departments of education, regional service agencies, and state and national associations. For many of these groups, we have completed research-based communication audits to analyze the communication flow, targeting, content, and effectiveness of their communication messages.

The NSPRA National Seminar, the most comprehensive school communication workshop anywhere, is held each July. This four-day session offers more than 70 topics on a wide array of school communication issues. The 2012 Seminar will be held in Chicago, Illinois.

NSPRA's monthly membership newsletter *Network* is seen as a communication resource for school leaders, not just our members. Each edition tackles a major problem and explains how communication can play a vital role in solving it. *PRincipal Communicator* is our building-level PR newsletter which provides practical help to school principals and other building-level leaders. The calendar and variety of communication topics are helping many to effectively improve communication at the community level. Our four electronic newsletters, *NSPRA This Week*, *The NSPRA Counselor*, *NSPRA Alert*, and *Opportunities*, provide summaries of breaking national education news, in-depth studies of issues and trends, and updates on seminars, products and services available to educators. *Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents* is an electronic newsletter targeting communication issues and topics for school system leaders.

The Flag of Learning and Liberty is a national education symbol, developed by NSPRA in its 50th Anniversary Year. On July 4, 1985, the Flag of Learning and Liberty flew over the state houses of all 50 states to launch the rededication of America's commitment to education and a democratic, free society.

NSPRA is a member of the Educational Leaders Consortium and works with all major national organizations to help improve educational opportunities for the nation's young people. The association also sponsors four national awards programs to bring recognition for excellence in communication to individuals, districts and agencies.

More information about NSPRA is available at www.nspira.org.



National School Public Relations Association

Auditors' Vitae

Richard D. Bagin, APR

Rich Bagin, APR, executive director of NSPRA since April 1992, has more than 30 years' experience in school and corporate public relations and communications.

In school public relations, Bagin served for eight years as the communication director and assistant superintendent for a suburban Philadelphia school system. In that capacity, he was responsible for internal and external public relations programs and dealt with crisis situations ranging from employee strikes to federal indictments of school district architects and legal counsel. Before that, Bagin was a secondary school English teacher, coach, and yearbook advisor in Pennsylvania. He has also served as Director of Communications and Development for the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Bagin has conducted numerous communication audits for school districts and corporate clients. He was instrumental in initiating the NSPRA communication audit process in the mid-1980s and has written articles on the auditing process that have appeared in various educational and communication periodicals. Bagin is the author of NSPRA's:

- Making Parent Communication Effective & Easy: Communication Guidebook for Teachers and Their Schools;
- Evaluating Your School Public Relations Investment;
- Planning Your School Public Relations Investment; and
- 101 PR Ideas You Can Use Now! ... And More!

He also wrote *Principals in the Public... Engaging Community Support*, jointly published by MetLife, NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals) and NSPRA. In addition, Bagin serves as a workshop leader for major education associations and school districts throughout the United States and Canada.

In the corporate sector, Bagin was senior vice president/general manager for two national and international public relations firms. He has counseled corporate 500 firms on strategy and implemented bottomline-oriented public relations and marketing communication programs in the private sector.

Bagin is accredited by the Universal Accreditation Board of the North American Public Relations Council. He is a member of PRSA's counselor's academy and also holds a master's degree in educational public relations. He serves as a board member for the Educational Research Service (ERS) and the National Association for Industry-Education Cooperation. In 2002, Bagin received NSPRA's prestigious Presidents Award, the highest award given to a professional in school public relations, for a lifetime of achievement in school public relations.

Sylvia Link, APR

Communications and Stakeholder Management Early Learning Division, Ontario Ministry of Education

Sylvia Link is a communications professional with more than 25 years of experience. She manages communication and stakeholder relations for child care and the new full-day kindergarten program in Ontario. Before joining the Ontario Ministry of Education, Sylvia served as manager of communications for one of North America's largest public school districts, developing communication strategies for 20,000 employees, 150,000 students, 232 schools and a culturally diverse community of 1.3 million people. Prior, she worked as a health care PR.

Sylvia teaches internal communications in the Corporate Communications post-graduate program of Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario. As well, she teaches Communications Management in the School Board Administration program at Guelph University. Sylvia conducts communication training workshops for conferences of the International Association of Business Communicators, National School Public Relations Association, the Canadian Association of Educators in Education, the Institute for International Research, and Unicef Canada. She regularly writes for education magazines and journals and has written about diversity communication for NSPRA resources. Sylvia also conducts communication audits for Canadian school boards and educational associations.

Sylvia holds professional accreditations both through the International Association of Business Communicators and the Universal Accreditation Board. She is also the recipient of numerous professional awards, including:

- Gold Quill Award of Excellence and Business Issue Award (top international award), International Association of Business Communicators
- Platinum PR Award (top international award), *PR News*
- Gold Medallion, National School Public Relations Association
- Cicero Speechwriting Award for Best Public Policy Speech
- Bronze Anvil, Public Relations Society of America
- Award of Excellence, Canadian Association of Communicators in Education

Sylvia is an active community volunteer:

- board member of Child Development Resource Connection Peel
- editorial board of *Education Today* magazine
- member, Education for Development committee, Unicef Canada
- chair, PR and Marketing Committee, Success by Six Peel
- board member, Peel Lung Association.
- A mother of three school-aged children, she also volunteers in her children's schools.

Connect with Sylvia: <http://ca.linkedin.com/in/sylvialinkapr> www.twitter.com/SylviaLink