NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry

Per NSPRA contest information, ACPS requests that this entry be automatically entered into the Golden Achievement Award contest (free of charge) if it is not selected for a Gold Medallion Award.

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Title of Entry: 2021-25 Alexandria City Public Schools Strategic Communications & Engagement Plan
Entry Category: Comprehensive, Strategic, Year-Round Communications Program
Comms Staff: Current number of communications staff = 8.5; Current number of SCR = 31
District Size & Type: Public school division with 15,477 students

SYNOPSIS OF THE PROGRAM

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) prides itself on its diverse student population, its world-class education and the stellar team that is delivering on its promise of instructional excellence, taking into account the need for equity for all. Effective and transparent communication is key to
ensuring that students, families and staff feel valued, heard and included at ACPS. In July 2020, as part of the superintendent’s reorganization of the Senior Leadership Team, the Department of School and Community Relations (SCR) was created to elevate communications in the school division. Two vital components became one team that includes the Office of Communications and the Office of Community Partnerships and Engagement led by the newly created roles of the chief of school and community relations, an executive director of communications and an executive director of community partnerships & engagement, all cabinet-level positions.

This structure has offered the team an opportunity to build a solid framework for its work and create a deep alignment to the ACPS 2025 Strategic Plan: Equity for All. This framework is the 2021-25 ACPS Strategic Communications & Community Engagement Plan, which is organized by the Strategic Plan goals most closely affiliated with the work of the SCR team. The department comprises many facets of the school division’s work including media and public relations, social, web and digital communications, photography and videography, crisis communications, internal communications, partnerships, family and community engagement, community outreach, grants, volunteers and out of school time programming. The team supports every aspect of the school division’s mission and core values and is poised to bring its work to new heights under this structure.

This plan was developed as a collaborative effort of the entire department, with many meetings, analyses of data and resources, brainstorming sessions and small-group meetings to consider the needs of the school division and address recommendations from the 2019 Communications Audit and the 2020 Family and Community Engagement Evaluation. It is not a top-down directive, but rather a plan to which each staff member has contributed and feels invested in carrying out successfully. The SCR team carefully crafted this plan as strategic, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based with an organized approach to evaluating the progress along the way. ACPS has entrusted this pivotal work to our team and, in following the road map we have created, our school division is already communicating and engaging at a deeper level to ensure that all students, families and staff feel part of the ACPS community through a shared voice--one that supports students to be at their very best while meeting their individual needs.

Research

Communications Audit
In summer 2019, the Alexandria City School Board contracted with an independent firm, BetsyOS PR LLC, to conduct an audit of the division’s Office of Communications. The audit team assessed the Office of Communications in the following areas:

- Strategy Assessment
- Tools Assessment
- Effectiveness Assessment
- Compliance Assessment
- Impact Assessment

The auditors spoke with School Board members, division leaders, members of the communications department team, staff, families and students, gathered a great deal of primary and secondary research and assessed a significant number of collateral materials. Primary research included 39 interviews, 15 focus groups, 73 surveys and a review of materials, media, plans and data. Secondary research included risk assessment and School Board committee and workgroup reports as well as surveys conducted in 2016, 2017 and 2018.
The audit team benchmarked ACPS using National School Public Relations Association rubrics of practice and suggested measures from 2018 that included comprehensive planned communications, internal communications, family communications, marketing/branding communications and crisis communications. A report presented to the School Board included 25 recommendations on staffing and organization, emergency communications, collaboration and opportunity, process and tools and putting the best foot forward.

A summary of key takeaways from the report included:

- **Staffing and Organization**: Combine the Office of Communications and the Office of School, Business and Community Partnerships into one department with two directors and a senior division leader; create the position of assistant director of communications; increase the half-time writer position to a full-time position
- **Emergency Communications**: Broaden participation of department staff in emergency communications and strengthen relationships with emergency responders; establish and train staff on emergency communication protocols;
- **Collaboration and Opportunity**: strengthen collaboration and role of communications team in launching and implementing all major division initiatives; develop and launch a customer service portal that includes a complaint process; develop programs that reach untapped constituencies
- **Process and Tools**: Implement a project management tool to track communication requests; redesign the school division website; expand close captioning services; expand staff communication initiatives; move audio/visual services to another department
- **Best Foot Forward**: Ensure accurate and grammatically correct information; embrace “bite, snack, meal” approach; proactively seek media relationships; advance planning for event

**Family and Community Engagement Evaluation**

In 2019, ACPS conducted a comprehensive division-wide evaluation of family engagement toward fulfilling its commitment to collaborate with families in providing high-quality services in the education of Alexandria’s youth. The evaluation identified strengths, challenges, and stakeholder feedback across key focus areas as well as a number of recommendations for improvement. ACPS has initiated the process for identifying the key drivers of change for systemic improvement which will be implemented in a forthcoming division action plan.

The purpose of this evaluation was to provide ACPS with a better understanding of the needs, barriers, resources, and services to engage all families across contexts. The evaluation was conducted in two phases with the internal ACPS evaluation team conducting surveys of families and staff in Phase I and ICF International conducting 1) observations (including site visits, secret shopper phone calls, and document analysis), 2) staff focus groups and interviews, 3) focus groups with English-speaking parents/guardians, and 4) group interviews with non-English speaking parents/guardians.

The evaluation framework focused on five key areas of focus: Environment/Culture; Relationships; Decision-Making; Communication Practices; and Initiatives and Activities. Components of three research-based parental engagement models were used to develop a comprehensive concept map catered to the unique needs and interests of ACPS.
In the final report, ICF included 56 recommendations for consideration. In support of the utilization of the evaluation findings, ICF identified two, high-level recommendations to be prioritized for systematic improvement within the division:

- **Relationship Building**: Strategic investments in staff development and utilization as well as increased family-facing programming, especially at the secondary level, were promoted as high leverage strategies for engaging families. Specific recommendations included:
  - Working to sustain and further leverage existing community partnerships and develop new ones
  - Adding supports for multilingual families to communicate with school front offices, such as a Language Line that makes three-way calling available to families
  - Increasing staff cultural competency training and outreach, including hiring additional bilingual staff

- **Expanded Resource Utilization**: The recommendation challenges the division to dig deeper to better understand why available resources supporting family engagement are underutilized and identify steps to continuously improve in this area. This includes:
  - Expanding multilingual signage in building and increase accessibility for families
  - Broadening dissemination of information and expanding family resources

Addressing high priority areas of building relationships and expanding the utilization of resources will allow ACPS to better partner with families in driving success for every student.

**Planning**

- **Listening Tours**: Starting in Spring 2021, School and Community Relations (SCR) leadership visited all 18 schools for a Listening Tour with principals, assistant principals and other administrators to better understand their communication needs, priorities, languages, community partners, family preferences for communication channels, key events and more. In addition, a Listening Tour is also underway with Central Office departments in order to collaborate with colleagues to share information about ACPS finances, human resources, student services, facilities and operations, and teaching and learning.
- **FACE blueprints**: Upon conclusion of the listening tours, the Family and Community Engagement Manager has led the process to analyze the information gathered and develop a tailored blueprint for family engagement at every school. This takes into consideration what was learned about family engagement needs and the resources that are currently available or have been identified as still needed at each school.
- **SCR retreats**: The SCR leadership team developed two retreats per year to map out the goals, strategies, tactics, timeline and assigned staff leads for the Strategic Communications and Community Engagement plan, which was organized to support the ACPS Equity for All 2025 Strategic Plan. Retreats included working as a whole to ensure our plan supports the mission, vision and core values of the strategic plan, as well as small-group work to focus on the specific objectives for communications staff and community engagement staff. Staff members were assigned to lead small groups after the initial retreat to advance the work; progress reports, edits and discussions of challenges formed the core of successive retreats.
- **Small group/Periodic department meetings**: Staff met regularly to brainstorm ideas and write sections of the plan. The writing was a collaborative effort, with every member of the SCR department having access to the shared document and the ability to edit,
revise, provide comments and suggestions. Every SCR employee contributed to the work of a small group and the formation of the plan.

- **SCR Quarterly Meetings:** Staff reported back on progress made and the status of specific projects at the full departmental meetings held on a quarterly basis. This was an opportunity to share feedback as well.

- **Vendor Selection and Onboarding:** During the planning process, SCR staff worked closely with colleagues in the procurement office to do outreach to vendors and secure the information, proposals and bids needed to select vendors for such projects as the website and ACPS logo redesign and the software to streamline communication channels and improve communications and engagement with families.

- **Timeline and measurement:** As small groups developed specific sections, we had to consider the feasible timeline that was in sync with the ACPS Equity of All 2025 Strategic Plan and the order of activities to accomplish the communications and community engagement goals in our department plan. In addition, we reviewed the potential metrics for each goal and established how the projects proposed in the plan would be evaluated once completed.

Upon completion of the planning stage, the plan itself began to take shape as our department discussed core opportunities and developed goals, along with the following:

- An understanding of our key audiences
- Objectives to fulfill the plan goals
- Messaging for the school division overall
- Strategies and Tactics
- Calendar
- Measurement and Evaluation

Once the 2021-25 Strategic Communications and Community Engagement plan was in final draft form, the Chief of School and Community Relations shared it with the Superintendent and the ACPS senior leadership team for their feedback. Any necessary edits were incorporated and the plan was designed and produced, at which point it was presented to the School Board via a Board Brief on Dec. 17, 2021, and posted online at the ACPS website.

**Implementation**

To date, the SCR team has addressed some of the recommendations that came from the research process and continues to make progress in advancing the strategies and tactics form the plan:

- **Reorganization of the Office of Communications:** The chief of school and community relations and the executive director of communications worked with the Department of Human Resources to restructure the Office of Communications. A television manager position was eliminated and an assistant director of communications position was created; additionally, the director worked with each staff person to update their job descriptions and with human resources staff to ensure titles were clear and consistent in the office. The digital communications specialist, webmaster and audio-visual services were placed under the supervision of the new assistant director, while the multimedia producer, writer and media relations specialist continued to report to the director. This allows for better cohesion among web and digital work and tighter coordination among the staff who are content creators.
• **Improvement in Emergency Communications:** The SCR chief led the effort to update and strengthen emergency communications procedures, working with counterparts in other departments and ensuring that the process within our department was strengthened and understood by all communications staff. The director began to create a “bank” of template messages that are frequently needed with a quick turnaround time, such as notifying families of school closures during inclement weather or of a delay in transportation, and even when a message is needed for a building lockdown. These templates will be available in four languages when needed and provide consistency in communications to families as well as a faster turnaround time that allows the team to simply fill in the blanks for date and any specific details needed. Additionally, the SCR chief and communications director met with counterparts in city government and emergency service agencies such as fire and police departments so these relationships can be tapped into as needed during a critical situation.

• **Streamlined and Stronger Family Communications with Schools & School Division**
  - **ParentSquare:** The community engagement and communications team worked to identify a platform that would help streamline communications between the school division, schools and families. The app selected, ParentSquare, allows for comprehensive communications that make it easier for staff to send mass notifications and newsletters, individual messages to families that can translate into a preferred language, forms needed by the school for field trips and other activities, and allows for increased sharing of social media and web content. This platform also makes it easier for teachers to communicate with families via text and email and for the division to manage emergency communications. Our team has worked with the vendor to tailor the platform for ACPS use and to train staff; currently, we are communicating with principals and school staff in preparation for a pilot program and then a full launch before the 2022-23 school year.
  - **Language Line Direct Response:** With more than half of all ACPS families speaking a language other than English at home, ACPS expanded interpretation services available through the division. As of Oct. 1, 2021, Language Line Direct Response is a new service that allows families who speak Spanish, Amharic, Arabic, Farsi and Pashto to contact our schools with a qualified interpreter already on the phone line. Direct Response is an addition to the existing phone interpreting services that staff use to contact families in more than 100 languages. Families dial a toll-free number when they need assistance in their home language and are then paired with an interpreter before connecting with the school. When families call the toll-free number, they are connected to a qualified interpreter and then the call is connected to the specific school front office for further service. Schools shared promotional materials in early October to help make parents aware of the service and this was featured in our ACPS Express newsletter, on our website and in social media.
  - **Ask@ACPS:** Our school engagement and community outreach manager led a team comprised of SCR and Tech Services staff to onboard a vendor to establish an ACPS Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and a newly created staff position, and external relations specialist, that would provide stakeholders with answers to divisionwide questions and a way to share
comments about current issues with ACPS leadership. The system was named “Ask@ACPS” and a branded logo and webpage were created to share with stakeholders the many ways to communicate with ACPS in multiple languages. This provides families with several ways to get the information they seek, either via email, online form or phone.

- **Website Redesign for Improved Communications and Greater Accessibility:** The Office of Communications began preparations for a new redesigned website to launch before the 2022-23 school year. A vendor was selected and onboarded in summer 2021, and internal and external advisory groups were formed to provide input and feedback at several points throughout the process. The assistant director of communications and web communications specialist served as the leads in launching the web redesign process. To date, the design and style guide have been established for the division home page and school home pages, and the mobile design is nearly final. The communications team has shared all current web content with all school principals for review and update before the content is migrated to the new site. At each step, feedback from the internal and external advisory groups was incorporated as revisions were shared with the vendor. The selected vendor, Finalsite, was selected because its services and software will help further the ACPS communications goals of ensuring staff, families, students and the community have timely and accurate access to information and engagement opportunities, feel welcome and supported, and have confidence in ACPS so that students are empowered to thrive in a diverse and ever-changing world.

Specifically the new website was undertaken to accomplish the following:

- Improve the end-user experience — with either a fully responsive or a mobile-first design, a more user-friendly website structure that is easier to navigate, all content meets ADA accessibility guidelines, and email newsletters that are visually appealing and stylistically aligned with our other communications materials.
- Provide high-quality automated translation of our online information by implementing a robust AI translation service that allows for greater accuracy to better meet the needs of the diverse ACPS community.
- Simplify web management for a more efficient and effective use of staff time by simplifying technical functions and giving more staff members the ability to make basic updates to keep our online information current.
- Reflect the school division brand with a clean, simple design that is diverse, forward-looking, focused on our students and is in sync with an environment that provides an equitable, high-quality educational experience that is accessible and engaging to all students.
- Add a vital platform for telling and archiving ACPS stories by using our new website will allow us to expand our communications channels and develop rich, compelling, and diverse stories showcased in multimedia formats that highlight our students, staff and programs and build upon the ACPS brand.
- Introduce a comprehensive staff intranet which ACPS currently lacks; our new website platform will allow us to separate public and staff information, and provide an information hub for internal communications.
- **Family Engagement Blueprint Action Plan (FEBAP):** This is a strategic starting point for schools and leaders committed to strengthening ongoing efforts and mechanisms designed to engage families and create an on-going culture of best practice family engagement (FE). These plans will be linked to learning for all families and support academic success for all students. The FEBAP process will assist schools to navigate the shifts needed to move from status quo family involvement events to transformative and ongoing family engagement mechanisms that are codesigned with families that represent the full diversity of the school community. The FEBAP process follows the Department of Education FE Dual Capacity Framework and ACPS Family Engagement Policy and is an ongoing process with dedicated staff, training time and leaders. The FEBAP process and the template may be useful for any school, particularly if a school participates in programs (21st Century Community Learning Centers, Special Education, etc.) that have specific family or stakeholder engagement requirements. Leaders will want to ensure that the family engagement action planning aligns and includes all programs and grant specific requirements.

- **ACPS Logo Redesign:** As SCR updates the website and improves other communication channels, a need emerged to modernize the ACPS logo which had been designed 20 years ago. The creation of a new logo for our school division is an opportunity to communicate the ACPS mission, vision and core values with a visual that is fresh, modern and recognizable as we work to reinvigorate the ACPS brand. Focus groups are underway with staff, families and secondary students to get their input and thoughts in advance of developing potential logos and determining the color palette for the official July 2022 launch. The new logo will be used on the website, printed materials and digital assets, and is key to the visual storytelling we do to convey that ACPS is welcoming, inclusive, collaborative, and stands for excellence in education.

**Evaluation**

A final evaluation of the plan will be conducted in June 2025 to measure efficacy and help direct future communications plans for the school division. A good indicator of success will be assessed by the number of completed projects by June 30, 2025.

Annual progress will be shared in the ACPS Measuring What Matters publication that is produced every year by the SCR team to detail accomplishments in our schools and school division. In addition, numerous measurement tools will be used throughout the duration of the plan to gauge success and modify efforts as necessary:

- Social media and web analytics
- ACPS surveys
- Targeted outreach will be conducted among select students, families, staff and community leaders to assess impact
- Data to assess family engagement in our communication channels
- News media outreach and fulfillment per Cision analytics

The various teams will also use best practice assessment tools to measure impact and provide regular reports. For example, success for the FACE Action Plan will be measured using quantitative and qualitative data from each school based on established goals and key indicators of high-quality family engagement programs and activities based on best practices and the Department of Education’s Family-School Dual Capacity Framework. This
measurement includes the use of a family engagement rubric and each school progress will be assessed annually. Data from the ACPS Equity survey, family event surveys/feedback, the number of high-impact activities and participation of staff in family engagement professional learning will be in consideration when assessing each individual school to demonstrate impact.

The Evaluation Monitoring Tool provided in Appendix B will also serve as a valuable instrument to regularly measure completion and execution of all strategies and tactics to realize all objectives.

- This tool is reviewed quarterly during our School & Community Relations (SCR) staff meetings to assess progress for all objectives.
- Each strategy will be compared to the proposed calendar for timely execution.
- The SCR leadership team will check off the boxes to the left once each strategy and tactic is deemed completed.

Pages 9-26: ADDITIONAL SUPPORT MATERIALS

SCR Strategic Communications and Engagement Plan: https://alexandriapublic.ic-board.com/attachments/effea8b2-67b1-4b57-816a-29c941c241f6.pdf
Communications Audit Report: https://alexandria.ic-board.com/attachments/a1d02ac1-7162-4008-a003-13efe86a6b99.pdf
Family Engagement Initiative Report: https://alexandriapublic.ic-board.com/attachments/ad331cc1-c75f-4e50-b6f0-d5f93bfbf7a6.pdf
Communicate with ACPS: Webpage for various ways that stakeholders can communicate with the school division in multiple languages, including the Language Line Direct Response, the ACPS Helpline and Ask@ACPS

Board Briefs: