ENHANCING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION by Design

Aligning structures, processes and messages and building ambassadors

Spring Lake Park Schools
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BACKGROUND
Spring Lake Park Schools uses human-centered design to create and innovate. Even in the midst of pandemic, we responded – instead of reacted – by design to continuously improve and adapt. As the 2021-2022 school year began, we did not want to lose momentum or return to “normal.”

We also experienced how, during the height of the pandemic, alignment among leaders, teachers and staff was essential for a consistent experience and for instilling confidence. We needed infrastructure to support sustained alignment between our internal stakeholders. Through frequent, consistent, accurate communication, our aim was to sustain alignment, foster trust and develop ambassadors of our staff.

1. Research (Discover)
We rounded with leaders and staff to understand our communication strengths and areas for improvement. Themes emerged:
• Our cabinet team wanted to sustain a level of innovation momentum as the pandemic subsided and continue to build a culture of appreciation and urgent optimism.
• Well-intentioned district leaders had variable communication practices. Staff members complained about being inundated with email messages each day, yet staff often felt frustrated because they didn’t know things that families knew before them.
• In the early days of the pandemic, staff heard more than ever from our superintendent. They appreciated his voice and leaders appreciated his visibility for championing the work they were being asked to lead.

2. Planning (Design)
With input from a variety of stakeholders, our communication team documented our current context and reality, desired results and unacceptable means and set out on a design process to:
• Support sustained innovation and improvement momentum coming out of the pandemic
• Create a communication infrastructure that streamlines key topics, is frequent and predictable, aligns messaging across schools yet still allows for personalization and ensures staff receive information before families do to support their critical role as ambassadors
• Balance local messages (ground support) with district messages (air support) anchored in appreciation and urgent optimism to build our desired culture

I have never appreciated more or felt more effective in our practices around our communications. I would immensely miss our routines, support and practices if we no longer collaborated as we do now on these items.
– Elementary Principal

3. Implementation (Deliver)
To support keeping intentional improvement and innovation going, we embraced a theme of by design aligned to our district’s 3D design process (discover, design and deliver). We have creatively applied the theme to a variety of topics, including our staff kickoff event to set the tone for the year.

As part of kickoff, we asked staff to share how they are moving forward (not going back) by design, and we invited local artist Phil Hansen to be our guest speaker. He shared his message and insights on the intentional work of creativity and innovation. We drew pictures together and submitted our drawings online. The day was inspirational. Weeks later, during fall staff appreciation, we visited each school and unveiled the artwork we had created together at kickoff – a mosaic of our drawings created a portrait of a graduate. The unveiling moment allowed us to reinforce how each staff member contributes to each graduate by design.

We created communication infrastructure, by design, to sustain our goals:
• We launched Leader Digest, a communication vehicle for leaders to receive items they need to do, know or share twice per week (Mondays, Wednesdays). Each issue includes 5-10 bite-sized items. Leader Digest is housed in our project management system, Asana. Team members can question/comment and the archive is searchable.
• We established a cadence and process for principals and district leaders to send staff updates to their teams twice per week (Tuesdays, Thursdays). Critical information is included in Leader Digest and cascaded to all staff with other local need to know and do items before parent communication occurs on Wednesdays. This allows for both consistency and building-level personalization. Staff updates also include shoutouts of appreciation.
• Monthly messages from our superintendent focus on appreciation and strategic alignment – reminding staff of the reason and intentionality behind our work.

4. Evaluation
We are achieving the goals outlined in our planning. The by design theme has effectively highlighted our 3D design process to support ongoing innovation. Our communication infrastructure is delivering desired results. For district messages alone this year, we are on track to save staff email inboxes 600-800 one-off messages through the Leader Digest and staff update structure. Through rounding, staff have repeatedly shared positive feedback – and ideas for content. If a building leader misses an update, they hear about it. Intentional shout-outs are a hook for readership along with knowing important information will be shared in one spot, in this format. Superintendent messages reinforce building- and team-level priorities from a strategic lens and communicate appreciation.
Dear Spring Lake Park Schools Staff,

The 2021-2022 school year is nearly here! At the beginning of this year, we have so much to celebrate. Our accomplishments in this time of pandemic learning are simply breathtaking. We have been caring, creative and innovative. We’ve had to be. We’ve learned. We’ve adapted. We’ve created. In so many ways, as we begin this year, we are fundamentally changed, as individuals and a learning community.

Now, at the start of a new school year, we take the next steps in the SLP experience, together, by design. Each of us contributes to this world-class learning community, anchored in helping each young person we encounter discover, build and achieve their dreams. Along the way, we discover, build and achieve our dreams, too. It all starts with our vision of ensuring each child is inspired and known by name, strength, interest and need. It starts with each of us.

We design this new year together starting at our All-Staff Meeting and Kick-Off Event on Tuesday, August 31, 8:30-11:30 a.m. Watch your email for location and more details.

We are planning a morning to refresh, equip and inspire you as we launch another successful year in Spring Lake Park Schools. You won’t want to miss some fun surprises or picking up your next (awesome) piece of SLP gear.

I cannot wait to start a new school year with you – in person. See you Tuesday, August 31. Until then, enjoy these last weeks of summer.

Jeff Ronneberg, Ed. D.
Superintendent

CREATING “BY DESIGN”
Communicating a cohesive SLP brand story for 2021-2022

1. Key Messages

HOW MIGHT WE DESIGN...
A world-class learning community where our vision comes to life...

A place where each young person experiences success in academics and life...

An environment where they discover their dreams and are set on the path to making them real.

Thanks to our pandemic experiences, we are fundamentally changed as individuals and a learning community. How we go forward does not look at all like where we’ve been. It all starts with our vision of ensuring each child is inspired and known by name, strength, interest and need. It starts with each of us.

Our SLP 3Ds – Discover, Design and Deliver – build to a fourth D - Dreams.

We work hard every day in Spring Lake Park Schools to design the learning experiences that help students discover, design and deliver their dreams.

2. Postcard

Staff kickoff event postcard mailed to staff households in August to introduce theme and key messages

3. Staff swag to kick off the school year

The kickoff event itself was evolving as the date approached due to changing pandemic conditions. Typically held altogether in an auditorium, instead the structure changed to virtual viewing parties streamed live at the school buildings. Staff enjoyed “welcome back” breakfast bars and receiving their new t-shirt for the year, all specially designed to incorporate the branding details and build excitement.
KICKOFF EVENT

Coming together to create our next steps celebrating each contribution

The best designs are the product of an environment where there are boundaries and constraints. We know this year will be defined by some constraints – we always have constraints in schools: regulations, standards, budgets, health and safety measures. Within these boundaries, we can – and do – create and innovate. In fact, sometimes, the challenges of things like COVID-19 force tremendous innovation, giant leaps forward as we made last year. This morning, we’ve invited Phil Hansen to join us from his studio downtown. Phil is an artist and someone who knows a thing or two about designing and creating within constraints. He’s going to share his story with us this morning – and lead us through an experience together.

1 Key Messages

2 Collaborative art experience

All 1,000 staff members heard from our superintendent as he led the flow of the live hybrid event. The main speaker, a local Minneapolis artist, shared his story of creativity within constraints and led an interactive art experiment. Staff drew and submitted their artwork during the event. While separated at the various buildings, it was important that staff still felt this sense of connection and collaboration in real-time on digital devices. The learning was designed to engage just as we ask teachers to do the same for students.

3 “Portrait of a Graduate” was unveiled by our superintendent at each school’s staff appreciation events about a month after kickoff. Our individual artworks had created the portrait just as each staff member contributes to each graduate.
COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Designing a streamlined and consistent process to share information with principals, district leaders and staff

1

Leader Digest in Asana

An example of Leader Digest published twice each week in our project management system, Asana. District and building leaders receive items they need to do, know or share. Team members can question/comment within Asana and the archive is searchable.

Staff updates twice per week

We established a cadence and process for principals and district leaders to send staff updates to their teams twice per week (Tuesdays, Thursdays). Critical information is included in Leader Digest and cascaded to all staff with other local need to know and do items. This allows for both consistency and building-level personalization. Staff updates also include shoutouts of appreciation. See two examples.

Message

Principal

All Staff at Northpoint Elementary

Happy Tuesday afternoon, I hope your week is off to a wonderful start!

January 12 Professional Learning: Please log onto my Webex on Wednesday morning for our professional learning. We will quickly provide you with context and parameters before you spend some team time proactively planning their possible sub shortages that could impact teachers individually, on their team, or school wide. We will start promptly at 8:00, and Heidi will send you an appointment with the link to my Webex.

SLP website disruptions resolved: Spring Lake Park Schools' website hosting service experienced worldwide disruption to services the week of January 3 due to a ransomware attack. Sporadic outages turned into major downtime throughout the week. We know this caused confusion and frustration for all who needed to access information and complete tasks on our school websites (and staff intranet). All services have now been restored and everything is working as normal. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Winter SLP Academy: Winter SLP Academy courses are open for registration. See the SLP Academy winter registration information and register.

Masking – after school activities: Following our current requirements, K-12 students and staff are required to wear masks for all school-sponsored after school activities unless they are actively practicing/competing or performing. At any events, all spectators are required to wear masks.

Shortened quarantine (for COVID-positive) and eating and drinking at school: Students and staff may return to school under the CDC guidelines for 5-day quarantine. Through their “day 10,” they should be wearing a face mask and have alternate plans for eating and drinking or any activity where they might remove their mask. Please help ensure that anyone who falls into this segment of our community can adequately distance (at least 6 feet) from others when eating or drinking. The Northpoint office will confirm with homeroom teachers any students that need to eat separate from their peers, we will provide this information daily. Please send students to the office for their snack. If a student needs to eat lunch separately upon their return, please have them go to lunch in the cafeteria and we will have either a separate table for them or they will eat in the Design Studio, depending on how full the cafeteria is during that lunch period.

Have a terrific evening,

Judi

Judi Kahoun, Principal
Northpoint Elementary
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Blaine, MN 5549

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Message

Principal

All Staff at Spring Lake Park High School

Shout outs in the New Year: I have really appreciated the collegial appreciation shared through the shout out inbox...Please keep the shoutouts coming so we can be buoyed by each other as we continue to do great work regardless of the challenges in front of us. Submit your shout outs here: Shout Out Inbox.

Enhancing the Learning Community: And from the Shout out Inbox, the following staff were recognized by a colleague for their work and mindset:

Delya Doshie, Behavior Specialist/Paraprofessional – Delya started just this year as a behavior para and comes to us as a licensed social worker. She has coalesced with our behavior team seamlessly and her ability to build rapport with students is exceptional! She is able to quickly de-escalate tense situations that students may be involved in and is not afraid to approach any problem behavior. She has proven to be a very valuable member of our team! Thank you Delya for all that you do!

Patty Jensen, Special Education – Patty is so very easy going and easy to work with. She is able to connect with ALL of the students on her caseload as well as with their parents. She is hyper-organized and I must include that I envy her organizational skills! Patty will drop everything that she is doing to support and help a student, a colleague, or anyone that is in need. Patty is a wonderful colleague and is truly an incredible asset to our school! Patty, you ARE appreciated!

Thank you, Delya, and Patty, for all you do to make SLPHS a supportive and inclusive place for all learners – students and staff – to grow and experience success. The work you do truly matters.

Message

Jeff Ronneberg

Monthly messages from our Superintendent

Monthly messages from our superintendent focus on appreciation and strategic alignment – reminding staff of the intentionality behind our work. They are sent directly via email and posted on the staff intranet.