NSPRA’s Golden Achievement Award Entry

Project: Pandemic Communications

Purpose:
To provide two-way communications between the district and students, staff, and parents to share information, pass along updates, and convey District news during the Coronavirus outbreak.

Analysis:
The Coronavirus Pandemic was a crisis like none districts had seen before. Although outbreaks of disease had come about in prior years, the country, government, businesses, and families had little understanding of what would happen. Schools took on a large burden throughout this time; making changes with little notice, while still trying to provide an education for all students. Throughout the challenges, staff took time to learn new methods, devise new plans, and above all provide as much information as quickly as possible. The importance of keeping education moving forward, engaging students, and helping families as much as possible became the goal.

Planning:
A Pandemic Committee was established in the District, consisting of the Superintendent, Public Relations Director, Emergency Management Chair, and the Business Manager. The group devised a Pandemic Plan to guide the District through the unknown stages of the crisis. The Plan outlined arrangements for continuing education, business office matters, facilities management, staffing, and communications. Communications took on several goals: 1. To communicate as often as possible with students, families, and staff members; 2. To send messages in various formats, using established methods; 3. To provide a means for two-way communication, help lines, and responses to questions. The plan also included updating several of the communication methods used by the District, including the web site, social media, and eNewsletters. Staff members would need to take on a more involved role with electronic communications, utilizing group messaging, online learning, and email groups.

A formal Pandemic Plan and Pandemic Communications Plan were written and shared with staff and the Board of School Directors. Contact information was shared throughout the District and with various outside organizations.

Execution and Communication:
Each building created on-line classrooms that were linked through the building principals. The District updated its web site to include a primary area where all updates and announcements on the pandemic would be posted. The page had various specified parts for news, health office, technology, athletics,
event calendar, and food services. Classroom news was distributed by the teachers. Social media was expanded to include YouTube video messages and tributes, especially to senior students. Facebook and Instagram were utilized daily for “good news” and congratulations to students and staff. Various programs and classroom activities were highlighted to show parents and the community how education continued. Letters were written from the Superintendent and sent out via Blackboard Connect when important matters were changing or needed to be publicized to all concerned. A weekly newsletter, Friday Focus, was developed and provided information on a regular basis on happenings within the District. Zoom meetings were held with various groups including School Board Meetings.

All students, staff, and parents, and many members of the community became part of the communications outreach. Many also provided encouragement and ideas to help improve the arrangements.

**Evaluation:**
Feedback throughout the pandemic continued in many fashions. Individuals took the opportunity to use the established help-lines and established emails to provide their opinions. Many favorable comments about the various communications practices were expressed from members of the school board, staff, parents, and teachers. In addition, a Communications Audit was completed during the 2020-21 school year that included a section on the pandemic response. Both surveys and in-person or phone interviews were held. Comments and responses were very positive from all involved. As a result, the changes to the website, the weekly newsletter, and the use of Blackboard Connect continued throughout this school year.

In addition, practices were added to the District’s communication practices now that the pandemic has lessened. District personnel are looking to bring back in person meetings and have them attended by administrators; a new quarterly meeting with the Superintendent will be added to the calendar; and new efforts to bring parents and community back to the buildings will be instated. All suggestions will be included in a new Communications Plan for the next year.