



# **Review of the Communications Operation of the Anchorage School District By the Council of the Great City Schools**

**Fall 2008**

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Council of the Great City Schools' Strategic Support Team review of the communications operation of the Anchorage School District. The Council conducted the review on August 18-20, 2008. The review, including a look at both internal and external communications of the district, was conducted by a team of communication directors and public relations executives from major urban public school systems across the nation. (*Biographies of the Strategic Support Team are presented in Appendix A*). The team made a series of findings and developed specific recommendations as a result of that review.

## **The Review Process**

Before the review began, the team met with Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau. The purpose of this meeting was to orient the team to the Superintendent's goals and objectives for the review. The Superintendent requested a candid assessment of the performance of the communications operation and recommendations on how to improve its efficiency and effectiveness.

The Superintendent indicated that the biggest issue the district faced in terms of communications was how to improve internal communications, particularly providing information to district employees with limited English and computer skills.

The Strategic Support Team reviewed documents and materials provided by the district's Communications Department staff before the team's visit on August 18. During its three-day visit, the team interviewed a number of district employees, school board members, as well as members of the media and others. (*A listing of individuals interviewed is presented in Appendix B*)

This report is organized around four broad themes—

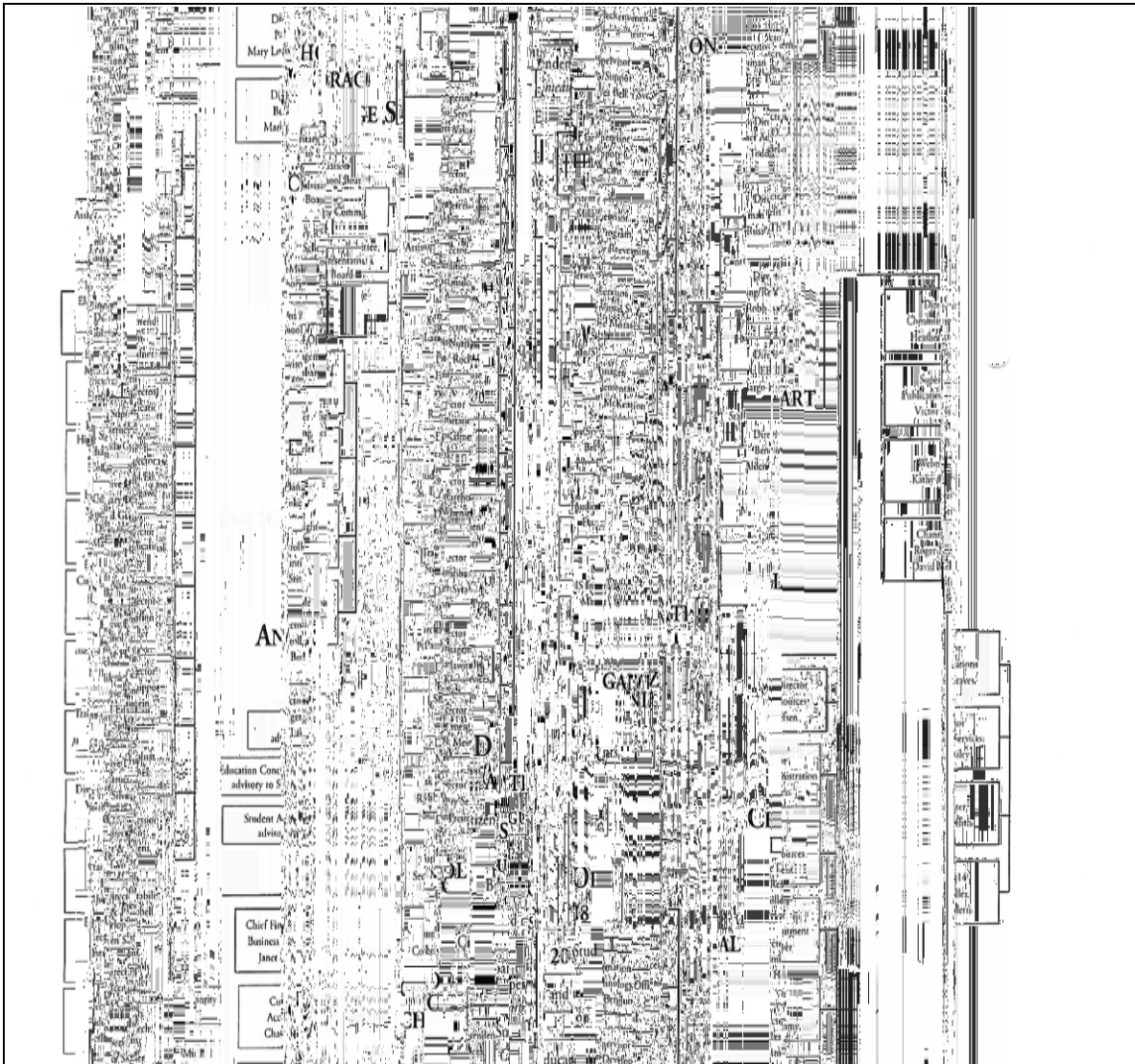
- Creating a master narrative for the district
- Reorganizing the structure of the Communications Department
- Improving the district's internal communications
- Increasing the visibility of senior staff and school board members

# Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

## Background

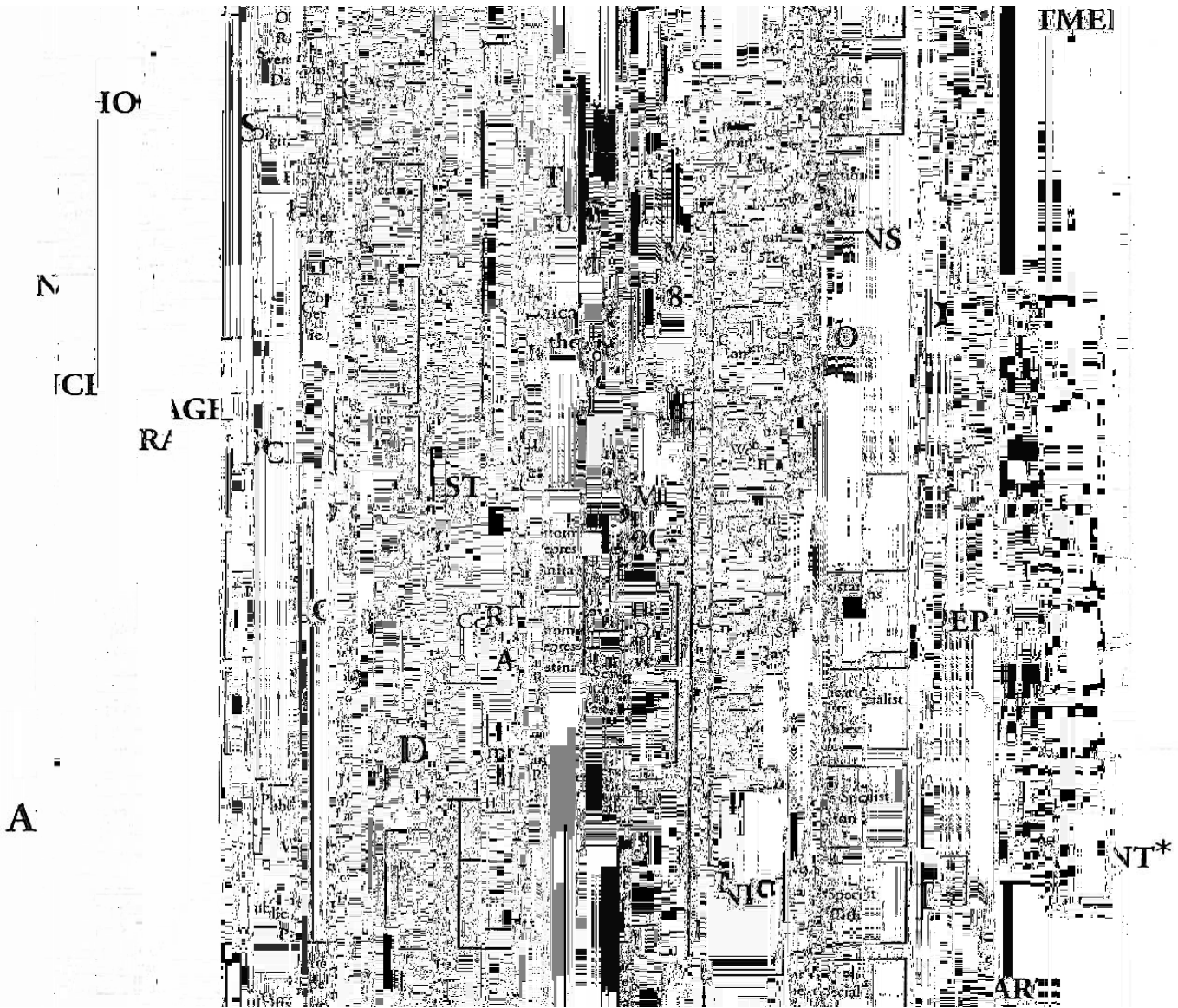
The Anchorage School District is the 88<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the nation, serving approximately 48,500 students. The system's enrollment is about 50 percent white, 13 percent multi-ethnic, 12 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 10 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Alaskan Native or American Indian, and 6 percent African American. This year, for the first time, minority students comprise 50 percent of the student population.

The Anchorage School District has a Communications Department led by the Director of Communications, who reports directly to the superintendent, as do five other senior administrators. (See organization chart below)



## Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

The Department is composed of 15 individuals with responsibilities for publications, copying, customer service communications, website, and media production. (See organization chart below)



- **Communications Director (now Heather Sawyer)** - Heads the department and supervises all internal and external functions
- **Administrative Assistant** - Provides administrative and clerical support
- **Publication Services Supervisor** - Manages the district's print shop, which is responsible for printing all of the district's publications
- **Publications Technician**- Typesets and formats texts of school district publications ranging from multi-color, multi-page items to forms design.
- **Offset Equipment Operators (3)** - Assists the publication services supervisor

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

- **Digital Copy Center Operator** - Assists the publication services supervisor
- **Customer Service Representatives (2)** - Handles customer service for the district
- **Senior Communications Specialist** - Handles media relations and external communications
- **Communications Specialist** - Handles internal communications and produces in-house publications and the weekly e-mail newsletter
- **Web Content Specialist** - Develops and manages the district's web site
- **Web Tech Specialist** - This position, which has not been filled yet, will assist the web content specialist by regularly updating the web site and helping schools develop their own web sites
- **Media Production Specialist (2)** - Operates the district's cable television station

The Communications Department operates the district's cable TV—Channel 14—as a public service to the community 24 hours a day. Approximately 20 percent of the programming on the station is produced by Channel 14 staff. The Department also houses the Print Shop for the district as well as two employees who handle customer service requests for the district. The Department's adopted budget (including salaries) for the 2008-2009 school year is \$1,156,191.

The size and scope of the Communications Department is comparable to communications offices in urban public school districts of similar size. For example, the Office of Communications for the Atlanta Public Schools, with a student enrollment of 51,000, has approximately 20 employees and manages its own print shop and television station.

And while only a few communication offices of big-city school districts, such as Atlanta and Norfolk Public Schools, operate their own print shops, several communication departments handle customer service for their respective school districts, including Austin, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Memphis.<sup>1</sup> Some other big-city school districts also include translation services, family and community relations, volunteer coordination, and other services under their communications operations; Anchorage does not.

### **Strengths of the Communications Operation**

The communications operation has a competent staff and is highly regarded by district employees. The Communications Department and the school system should be commended for—

---

<sup>1</sup> See Council of the Great City Schools (2007). *Public Relations Offices in the Great City Schools*.

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

- Maintaining general satisfaction with communications across stakeholder groups in the school district
- Generating high levels of satisfaction regarding emergency/incident response
- Building a productive relationship between the Communications Department and schools (especially with regard to schools sharing good news stories and with media contacts)
- Building an exceptional relationship with the news media
- Reaching out to the business community through the Anchorage School Business Partnerships program, which publishes a newsletter and has a placement in the Chamber of Commerce magazine
- Positioning a highly visible, dynamic, and well-loved superintendent
- Offering an extensive amount of information on the web concerning the school district
- Ensuring strong recognition of the school district's mission — to educate all students for success in life

### **Findings and Recommendations**

This section presents the team's findings and recommendations to assist the communications operation in improving its effectiveness and perform at an even higher level. In general, the team found the Communications Department of the Anchorage School District to be one of the strongest that the Council of the Great City Schools has seen. The proposals that follow were designed to help move the communications operations to the next level of excellence.

#### ***1. Creating a Master Narrative for ASD***

##### **Recommendations**

- Develop a master strategic narrative. Use storytelling to put a face on issues and more readily persuade with an emotional appeal.
- Adopt a strategic messaging approach identifying key messages to emphasize for the year. (*See sample in Appendix C.*)
- Increase direct communications to teachers and support staff using a systematic, predictable schedule of messages. This can take a variety of forms such as a formal speech, fireside chat, or taped focu

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

When asked to identify key messages or initiatives for the school system, stakeholders often provided a variety of answers — but no clearly defined, focused list emerged. This inconsistency suggests a problem, but also presents the district with an opportunity for significant improvement in communications. Employees and community members should

## **Review of the Anchorage School District’s Communications Operation**

developed should appear in multiple venues/media. This consistent long-term messaging provides tremendous leverage in managing change and winning the hearts and minds of stakeholders.

Much content is filtered as it moves through the organizational structure. To ensure employees feel directly engaged and better ensure that they understand key messages, the Strategic Support Team recommends implementing some direct, whole-group communications opportunities for the Superintendent and members of her senior staff (*Appendix C is an example of Norfolk’s strategy that utilizes an Administrators Convocation, an All-Staff Address, a State of the Schools Address, and an End-of-the-Year message.*). These whole-group opportunities need not necessarily take the form of a formal speech, but might also include televised “fireside chats” or panel discussions that would serve to focus employees on key messages.

### ***2. Suggested Structure for the Communications Department***

#### **Recommendations**

- Reorganize the communications office staff to *decrease* the number of direct reports to the Communications Director while allowing for a more extensive focus on strategic messaging. (*See Appendix D.*)
- Use the resources and staff expertise of the district’s television station more effectively to get information and messages out to all employees. Capitalize on streaming video technology to enhance web-based communications.
- Streamline the district’s website and use of e-mail to schools in order to mitigate “information glut.” The district might do this by implementing a content management system for sending e-mails from the district office to individual schools, and re-design the web site to make it more easily navigable. Consider consolidation of e-mail traffic through the use of a hot sheet, and/or designated department/division staff member who manages flow/volume of e-mail.
- Close the loop on employee input and involvement in decision-making to ensure that staff knows what decisions were finally made and why. (A specific example of this challenge was presented by representatives of the teachers union who indicated that some of their members participated on committees to discuss stipends for certain types of employees, but never heard back as to what decision was made, what the pay level would be, and why recommendations from teachers were/weren’t used. Staff members indicated that they wanted “authentic” involvement opportunities.)
- Continue capacity development for all administrators in the area of





## **Review of the Anchorage School District’s Communications Operation**

strategic objectives. The Director could help facilitate this type of thinking by leading the communications team in development of a yearly editorial calendar and/or regular editorial meetings.

The team also suggests moving beyond the internal/external designation for members of the Communications Department staff. Just as the Director can not be the only person focused on delivering strategic messages, each staff member must see his or her responsibility as serving both internal and external audiences as the need dictates. *(Suggestions for determining appropriate venues/media for reaching internal audiences more effectively will be addressed in a later section.)*

Another possibility is the use of an “account executive” model or “beat” system where each communications staff member is assigned particular departments and/or schools and required to develop a strong, collaborative relationship with that group. This allows for expert communications assistance on each department’s upcoming initiatives or challenges and provides an early-warning system for emerging issues.

It would also be helpful to consider an “instructional boot camp” for communications

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

## Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

a particular employee group (e.g., monthly meetings of all principals, Superintendent visits to all maintenance staff twice per year), while others include representatives from particular groups of staff (e.g., a teacher advisory group, regular meetings with leaders of collective bargaining units).

Other communications tools are designed to reach broader audiences, including employees who are residents of the greater Anchorage community. These tools include—

- ASD Online, the district's website;
- ASD Direct, e-mail notification services available through the website;
- Television broadcasts and notices on ASD-TV 14, the district's cable television channel;
- Press releases and media stories;
- The district's monthly full-page newspaper advertisements in the *Anchorage Daily News*;
- Other publications, such as *Expect the Best* and AYP results;
- School Messenger pre-recorded telephone voice messages (these can be sent to all families and staff, or tailored to reach particular groups).

This array of tools and strategies represents an impressive effort to communicate with staff, but ASD leaders are wise to be asking what more can be done, or in some cases, might be done differently. Given the appointment of a new Communications Director, now is an appropriate time to evaluate the effectiveness of existing vehicles. This baseline data and subsequent evaluations will allow for more data-driven decision-making regarding these tools.

With respect to internal communication, it is important to consider not only the *means* of communications, but perhaps more importantly, the *content* of the communication. The Communications Department may be well positioned to take a more strategic, intentional approach to internal communication that strikes an effective balance among various types of messages. For instance—

- There is a great deal of information that employees must know in order to perform their jobs effectively, as well as logistical information about their own employment (payroll, benefits, etc.), emergency preparedness, and other matters that may require them to follow particular policies or procedures.
- Other messages involve breaking news in the district, most notably major announcements like test results or a recent assault. It is important for employees to be “armed” with timely, accurate, digestible information about these matters, particularly

## **Review of the Anchorage School District’s Communications Operation**

more controversial topics, so that they can serve as effective spokespeople in their communities and not contribute to misinformation.

- Current employee outreach efforts highlight many positive human interest stories about the achievements of individual students and staff. These smaller “feel good” news items help “put a face” on ASD, boost morale, and reinforce the message that every adult and child is critical to the success of the district as a whole.
- What seems to be lacking in the current approach to internal communication in ASD is an emphasis on “the big picture”— hence the need for a master narrative and identified key messages (as discussed in a previous section). While most staff we

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

their proven ability to think strategically about how to share information among their colleagues.

The Anchorage School District, moreover, might consider the cost-savings (and small revenue generation) of contracting with **1<sup>st</sup> Hour** or another vendor to print and mail *The Zone* or another printed newsletter for families and staff. 1<sup>st</sup> Hour ([www.1sthour.com](http://www.1sthour.com)) will print a four-page, full-color newsletter five times per year and mail it to households along with a series of commercial advertising inserts (used in Boston, Memphis, Jacksonville, and other districts). The vendor also returns a portion of the proceeds to the school district. [Note: While 1<sup>st</sup> Hour will produce and mail only one version of the newsletter, some districts produce translated

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

Finally, for staff members who are not effectively reached through existing means, the district should be thoughtful about communicating with these employees through the vehicles on which they already rely in their **homes and communities**. For example, if there are significant numbers of Spanish-speaking employees in service roles, identify the ways that these Spanish speakers receive information about other programs and services in their communities – for example, ethnic radio and newspapers, churches, as well as more informal channels like community-based organizations. This requires a differentiated (and labor-intensive) approach, given the uniqueness of each linguistic and cultural minority. This approach and effort would also help in targeting messages to the external ethnic and poor communities at large.

### ***4. Increasing the visibility of senior staff and school board members***

#### **Recommendations**

- Include senior staff in communications opportunities with media and key stakeholder groups.
- Develop an appropriate public profile for School Board members. Leverage their connections in the community and among staff to get key messages out and to hear concerns and receive feedback that can be directed to the Superintendent and/or senior staff.

Without question, the most valuable communications asset in the Anchorage School District is the undeniably popular, credible, and respected Superintendent Carol Comeau. She is the face and voice of ASD, a dynamic leader, educator, spokesperson, and cheerleader – heralded as the most trusted public figure in the State of Alaska. The Superintendent engages parents, students, staff and citizen

## **Review of the Anchorage School District’s Communications Operation**

who are not as comfortable becoming more visible in the community, there is no one better positioned than Superintendent Comeau to coach and mentor them to grow in that regard.

Similarly, the School Board – both as individuals and as a collective body – seems to be underutilized as credible spokespeople for the “big picture.” The current practice of the School Board commenting on the record to media primarily on policy issues is appropriate and should continue. But the community should have as much confidence in the School Board (again, less as individuals than as a cohesive, effective body) as they clearly do in the Superintendent herself. The apparent unity and professionalism of the Anchorage School Board are critical to the continued success of the district, and these assets might be highlighted in schools and the community as yet another point of pride.

### **Conclusion**

The Communications Department of the Anchorage School District operates an effective communications operation and should be commended for maintaining excellent media relations; providing the district with an informative and highly used web site; cultivating strong relationships with various stakeholders and responding to crisis situations in a timely manner. This report is an effort to assist the district in getting to the next level, particularly in terms of building a top-notch internal communications operation. The Anchorage School District is becoming increasingly diverse, in terms of not only students but employees, so it is vital that the Communications Department strengthen its internal communications so all district staff feel they play a critical and valued role in the organization.

**APPENDIX A. STRATEGIC SUPPORT TEAM**

**Keith Bromery**

**Keith Bromery** is the Director of Communications for the Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the sixth largest public school system in the nation. As the director, he provides communications advice and counsel to the Superintendent and School Board; serves as chief media spokesperson; produces television programs; serves as editor of electronic and published employee newsletters;



## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

of Fine Arts degree from Emerson College in Boston. He recently co-authored with Dr. Payzant a chapter in the book *A Decade of Urban School Reform: Persistence and Progress in the Boston Public Schools*, published by Harvard Education Press.

### **Vincent Rhodes**

**Vincent Rhodes** serves as Communications Manager and Clerk of the Board for Norfolk Public Schools, the largest urban school system in the Commonwealth of Virginia and one of the top 150 largest school systems in the country. In that capacity, Rhodes directs crisis and strategic communication efforts with the goal of increasing community support for a school system that won the prestigious 2005 Broad Prize for Urban Education and has begun to attract national media attention for its efforts to improve academic achievement for all students. He also serves on the Superintendent's Cabinet working with senior-level administrators to develop strategic plans for achieving School Board goals and ensuring efficient day-to-day operations. Rhodes has been a freelance graphic designer and feature writer since 1992 and his work has been recognized with a variety of awards from the National School Public Relations Association and the Florida Magazine Association. He earned a Bachelors degree in Communication and Biology from James Madison University, a Masters degree in Professional Writing and Rhetoric from Old Dominion University, and is currently working on a Doctorate in New Media and Professional Writing.

# **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

## **Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation**

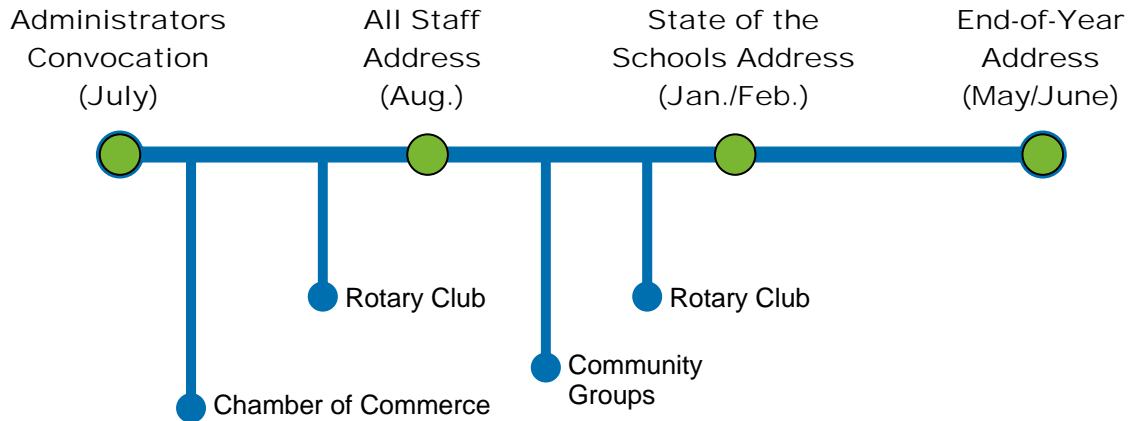
- Dale Miller, Representative from General Teamsters 959, Warehouse & Maintenance Employees as well as Food Service Workers
- Billy Meers, Representative from the Alaska Public Employees Association Local 71, AFL-CIO representing Custodians and Building Plant Operators
- Sharon Baker, Representative from TOTEM Association of Educational Support Personnel

**APPENDIX C. NORFOLK'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

One of the first phases of improving Norfolk's executive communications program involved unifying the overall theme for the year. Like a political stump speech, key elements and themes are repeated to ensure that they are received and understood. Other parts are customized for or applied to specific arguments.

For non-politicians, this approach seems repetitive, but the repetition is often necessary because the audiences differ.

# Strategic Messages



## Connecting the Stump Speech & Key Themes to Other Talks

## Suggested Readings

- *Stephen Denning, The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative, 2005*
- *Stephen Denning, "Telling Tales," Harvard Business Review, May 2004*

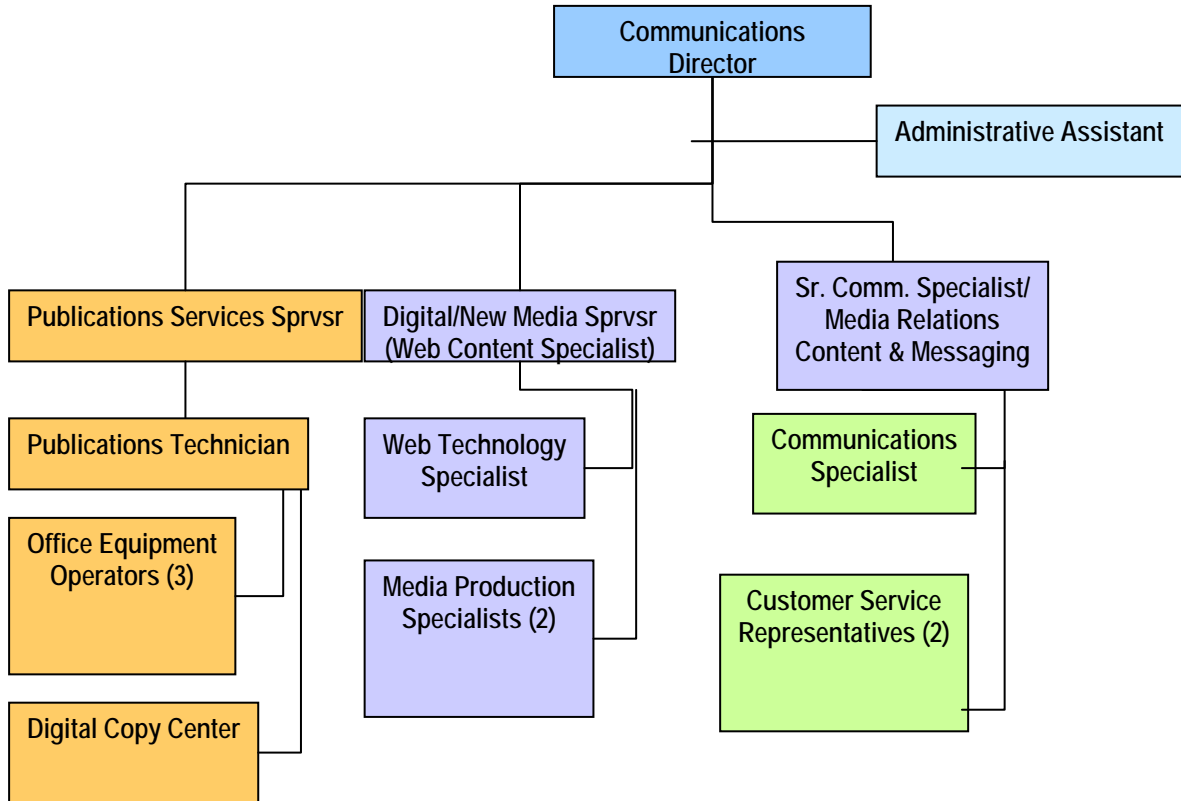


**APPENDIX E. SAN DIEGO COMMU**



**APPENDIX F. PROPOSED ORGANIZATIONAL CHART**

Second Proposed ASD Communications Department



**NOTE:** This organization structure is merely a suggestion. The goal would be to decrease the number of direct reports to the Director of Communications to allow for more focus on overall strategy and facilitating strategic planning for the communications staff. This suggested structure reprograms the Web Content Specialist position to a supervisory role and adds content/messaging responsibilities to the Sr. Communications Specialist position to better align print, new media and content development functions.

## **Review of the Anchorage School Di**

## Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

### History of Strategic Support Teams Conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools

City	Area	Year
Albuquerque		
	Facilities and Roofing	2003
	Human Resources	2003
	Information Technology	2003
	Special Education	2005
	Legal Services	2005
	Safety and Security	2007
Anchorage		
	Finance	2004
	Communications	2008
Birmingham		
	Organizational Structure	2007

## Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

	Facilities Operations	2000
	Transportation	2004
	Curriculum and Instruction	2005
	Safety and Security	2007
	Safety and Security	2008
Columbus		
	Superintendent Support	2001
	Human Resources	2001
	Facilities Financing	2002
	Finance and Treasury	2003
	Budget	2003
	Curriculum and Instruction	2005
	Information Technology	2007
	Food Services	2007
Dallas		
	Procurement	2007
Dayton		
	Superintendent Support	2001
	Curriculum and Instruction	2001
	Finance	2001
	Communications	2002
	Curriculum and Instruction	2005
	Budget	2005
	Curriculum and Instruction	2008
Denver		
	Personnel	





## **Review of the Anchorage School Di**

## Review of the Anchorage School District's Communications Operation

	Transportation	2005
	Curriculum and Instruction	2007