

## HALIFAX REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE

**PURPOSE:** To provide the Halifax Regional School Board with an update on communication activities and progress toward improving the effectiveness of communication in support of the vision, “Every student can learn and every school will improve.”

### **BUSINESS PLAN**

**GOAL:** Goal #5: To improve the effectiveness of communication with all partners, both internal and external.

**BACKGROUND:** In addition to recognizing communication as one of the goals in the 2008-2009 Business Plan, both the board and the superintendent have identified Communications and Public Engagement as key areas of focus.

In the *Report to the Community* in September 2007, the board stated it would, “ask Senior Staff, through the Superintendent, to develop a new public engagement process to allow parents and other community members to participate in meaningful dialogue.”

In her annual report, *Good Schools to Great Schools!*, the superintendent stated, “Communications and staff-community engagement through consultations have improved, but continue to be areas where we need to make significant improvements.”

During the 2007-2008 school year, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) conducted a communication audit of the Halifax Regional School Board. The audit provided for an in-depth, independent review of the HRSB’s current communication efforts, the climate for communication, the issues and image perceptions facing the HRSB, and the communication needs and patterns of our target audiences.

In June 2008, the board received the audit report from NSPRA along with 15 recommendations for future consideration.

**CONTENT:** Based on the audit recommendations as well as direction from senior staff and the board, the following activities will be areas of focus for the communications department during the 2008-2009 school year.

#### **1. Develop a strategic communication plan**

Recommendation #1 in the audit called for the development of a strategic communication plan. This plan will essentially become the ‘road map’ for the board’s communication efforts. Internal and external communication will be strategically planned, and activities and projects will be considered in terms of how they support the vision of, “Every student can learn and every school will improve.”

**Progress:** A plan has been drafted and Senior Staff is currently in the process of reviewing in detail.

2. **Revise policy F.002 Communications and develop a public engagement process**

The current HRSB communications policy was approved in January 2001 although procedures were never developed to support its implementation. This has created some sense of uncertainty and confusion about whether there are consistent protocols for communication that should be followed. A new policy with clearly defined procedures should address the concerns regarding how and what to communicate, and who is responsible for ensuring messages are delivered.

As outlined in both the board's *Report to the Community* and the communication audit, engaging the public is critical to building trust and confidence in HRSB schools. Engagement of our key partners will become more critical as the HRSB moves forward with the vision that in the next five years, "Every student can learn and every school will improve." More than ever, the HRSB will need to clearly communicate on its progress, its challenges and its plans to continually improve

If we are to engage the community in supporting schools then the public needs to know how we are doing. A new public engagement process will create opportunities for meaningful dialogue with the community. The process will also ensure there is a procedure in place to inform stakeholders (close the loop) on the outcomes of actions taken as a result of their input.

**Progress:** It is anticipated a new communications policy and public engagement process will come to the board for approval in December 2008 or January 2009.

3. **Improve internal communication and emphasize the role of employees as ambassadors for the HRSB**

One of the key components of a successful communication program for any organization is an engaged and informed work force. With 8,000 employees, internal support of key messages is critical for the HRSB. We must do everything we can to ensure our employees have the information they need to be supportive of our communication efforts as they are credible sources of information.

**Progress:** To keep employees informed, senior staff has:

- Created a weekly electronic management memo – providing school leaders with one communication each week of routine information from all board departments.
- Created information packages for frontline communicators (i.e. staff who respond to public inquiries) on major initiatives.
- Created a process whereby communication is incorporated into discussions of all major decisions (i.e. how, what, when and by whom)

In the coming months, the idea of employees as ambassadors for the HRSB will continue to be expanded through the development of the strategic communication plan and the new communication policy. Staff members who are comfortable and confident in their role as communicators will ensure the overall communication program is more effective and far-reaching. This in turn will build trust and credibility with all education partners.

**4. Create individual communication plans for major initiatives or changes in board programs or policies**

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. Individual plans should identify clear messages for various target audiences and develop the best strategies and vehicles for delivering those messages in order to keep stakeholders informed and engage them to action.

*Progress:* A template for individual communication plans has been developed and is ready for use. Initiatives requiring individual communication plans are identified by senior staff.

**5. Improve the effectiveness and usability of board and school web sites**

The use of the Internet has dramatically changed how school systems communicate with key audiences. School board and individual school web sites are critical communication tools, and they are often the first impression that people have of the board and the schools. We want to ensure all school web sites are comprehensive, up-to-date and contain a wealth of information.

*Progress:* Research is currently underway to examine best practices among school boards in North America. Staff is also exploring the possibility of establishing a common template for school web sites and developing a production and style guide for schools to follow.

**COST:** N/A

**FUNDING:** N/A

**TIMELINE:** Immediate and ongoing

**APPENDICES:** N/A

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

That the board receive this report for information.

**COMMUNICATIONS:**

AUDIENCE	RESPONSIBLE	TIMELINE
School Community via website	Doug Hadley Coordinator - Communications	Following Board approval

**From:** For further information, please contact Doug Hadley, Coordinator – Communications Services, at 464-2000 ext. 2226 or by e-mail at [dhadley@hrsb.ns.ca](mailto:dhadley@hrsb.ns.ca)

**To:** Senior Staff – September 19, 2008  
Halifax Regional School Board – September 24, 2008

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