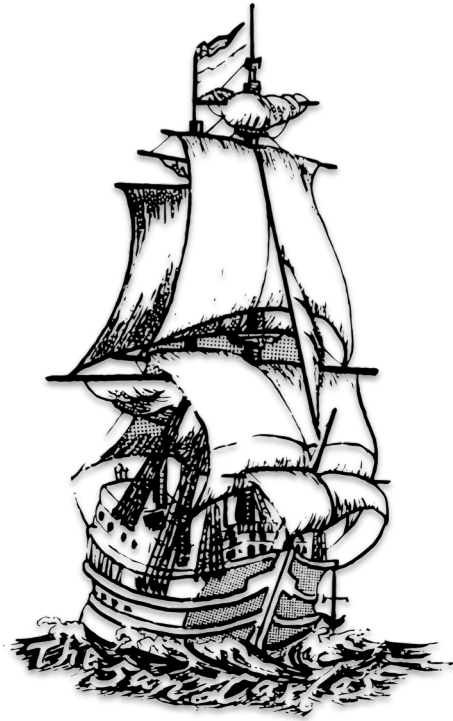


San Carlos School District



Communications Audit Findings

March 2016
Neha Singh Gohil

This report outlines my findings on audience perceptions of the San Carlos School District's overall profile, positioning, thought leadership, outreach, and communications efforts. What follows is an in-depth look at how San Carlos School District (SCSD) is perceived by its key internal and external stakeholders. While several stories and experiences were shared as part of the process, this is not intended to be a fact-finding report. Rather, it is focused on how district-wide communications processes are impacting the district's ability to have impact and traction.

In gathering information for this report, I collected a broad range of feedback from SCSD staff, school site administrators, parents, community partners and funders. I also examined the district's digital and print communication channels.

Overall, SCSD is well regarded in the education field, and is perceived as being very committed to the whole child in its classrooms. People value the district's efforts, approach and thoughtful stewardship of financial resources. Even amongst those who do not have children currently enrolled in the district, respect for the district and its competency is high.

At the same time, SCSD is perceived – by almost all stakeholders - as being behind the ball in terms of communications. Throughout the interviews and surveys, people consistently mentioned the need for SCSD to be “proactive” in public conversations and to “engage community” when making decisions. External stakeholders spoke of feeling “ignored” or “overlooked.”

While most everyone likes what the district is doing, the buzz around SCSD's work seems more attributable to informal word of mouth conversations than to a thoughtful, strategic communications plan executed by SCSD itself.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE RESEARCH

A lot of what I heard from internal and external stakeholders about SCSD was positive. However, the following key takeaways represent areas that district leadership may want to consider when shaping a new communications plan for SCSD.

- **There is a fundamental difference in how various stakeholders perceive SCSD's strengths.** For the majority of internal stakeholders – parents, community partners, students – SCSD stands out because of its committed volunteers and its focus on the “whole child.” Only one funder and a handful of principals highlighted the innovations happening in SCSD as being what is unique about the district. SCSD needs to share a common message that applies to all stakeholders if it is to be seen as a lighthouse in the field.

- **Few people outside of the core leadership team are able to articulate the essence of SCSD’s strategic plan.** In its current form, the strategic plan, while visionary, does not translate well for an external audience. To some extent, it requires a good deal of time and some understanding of educational theory to follow. The plan needs to be more accessible to non-practitioners.
- **SCSD lacks a consistent, recognizable visual brand and voice across its communications.** The district logo, while included on letterhead, is almost completely omitted from most district collateral. It doesn’t appear anywhere on the website, which has a completely different brand feel. In addition, thought leadership materials (e.g. the Habits of Mind cards) have no consistent branding or color palette with the district’s look and feel.
- **SCSD is perceived as “acting first, communicating later.”** Despite the district’s efforts to engage community members, there is a strong perception that SCSD moves forward on issues without enough consultation. Stakeholders seem quick to jump to the conclusion that simply because they do not have a particular piece of information, it means that the district has behaved in a defensive or secretive manner. Among the people I interviewed, this inimical atmosphere was credited with leading to increased dissatisfaction and speculation among parents.
- **SCSD’s identity and success are inextricably linked to the active parent population in its schools.** The majority of people I spoke with talked about SCSD as a lighthouse because of its “strong community support” and its “small town feel.” This overwhelming sense of pride in the school community creates an expectation that community will be involved, contribute and brought along in conversations about the schools.
- **SCSD stakeholders want to hear shareable stories about its successes.** Overall, the public perception of SCSD is a positive one. Everyone wants to be able to share the district’s accomplishments with other people. To do that, board members, residents, funders and parents alike want a better idea of what is happening, what is working, and how the district is progressing towards its goals.

All of these findings are discussed in greater detail below.

COMMUNICATIONS WITHIN THE DISTRICT

School Sites are the Primary Messengers for the District – Each school site has taken on the responsibility for front-line communications with parents and community members. The majority of schools are doing this via a weekly newsletter. In our community survey, school newsletters topped the list of ways in which people get information about San Carlos’ schools. Direct conversations with

teachers and students were respectively the second and third most common ways of getting this information.

However, in several cases, newsletters are not archived or easily available. In addition, newsletters from different schools are sent at different times during the week, making it hard to coordinate the release of information, especially when that information is controversial. Even those messages that make it into every school's weekly newsletter are often conveyed or edited in their own ways. The result is that different people are getting bits of information at different times from their schools, leading to confusion.

The pace of other communications from the school varies greatly. For example, schools reported sending anywhere from 20 to 58 letters home in the first semester. Also, parents are specifically looking for more direct email interaction / newsletters from their child's teachers. Several parents made requests to help coordinate Shutterfly sites so that their use is consistent across classrooms.

Having school sites be the spokespeople for district-related matters also means that messaging is often inconsistent or scattershot. Some schools place the information on their websites or Twitter pages, while others do not have Twitter or Facebook pages at all, and update their websites only on an annual basis.

"If it comes from teachers, I will read it." – SCSD Parent

I'd like to see something sent out on a regular basis that pertains to just district news vs. seeing it in the school newsletters where the district news is usually "buried" towards the bottom of the edition. – SCSD Parent

"The district needs to work on consistency, so that the same message is sent out by all schools." – Elementary School Principal

"I have a child who will be starting Kindergarten in 2017 and I'd really like to know if it will be possible to tour...her neighborhood school. I've scoured the website but can't find anything about this." – San Carlos resident

School Sites are Looking for More Structured Communications Training for Teachers – Though nearly all school principals are working with teachers on some aspect of communications with parents, several of them would like to improve or formalize this work. Most of the communications professional development is done in the beginning of the year, specifically with regards to Back to School Night or setting parent expectations around communications for the year. Very little of this training for teachers pertains to district-wide or big-picture initiatives.

"We have had a formal school-wide goal of improving classrooms to home communications, collaborating with the teaching team to expand communication content to connect families with our district and site goals, Common Core, infused technology, PBL and Whole Child." – Middle School Principal

"We need to rethink how we maximize parent time during Back to School night. We don't need to be going through a 4-page document at that time. We need teacher training around that sort of communication." – SCSD Board Member

Most School Site Staff Rely on Principals to Relay Conversations from the District – Few of the schools reported direct interactions between the district and teachers, besides the interaction with district human resources staff. Instead, teachers learn about district priorities through emails from the principals, during staff meetings, or through word of mouth. In some cases, this leads to confusion and inconsistent messages going out to staff.

"I think it would be helpful to have more direct communications from the district office to staff in one combined vehicle such as an electronic newsletter." – Elementary School Principal

School Site Administrators Appreciate the Support they Receive from the District in Explaining the Big Picture – Amongst the things that site administrators appreciated the most was SCSD's support for parent education nights and in conveying school board priorities. Administrators felt that they were being given a strong mandate and resources to talk with parents about the strategic plan, board agendas/dates, and ROPES. This is partly because these topics are generally conveyed in the form of school newsletter items that appear consistently and regularly.

COMMUNICATIONS TO EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Community at Large – San Carlos residents who are not otherwise engaged with the district tend to hear more about the controversies than the good news from the district. This proves difficult to reconcile with their perception of SCSD as being good for students, and could affect fundraising efforts for the district in the long term.

Several community members asked for a newsletter that they could sign up for to get news about the district on a regular basis. This is a ripe opportunity to build allegiance and pride amongst our neighbors in a way that would add to the district's

reputation as a thought leader and innovator, and would directly add to the fundraising goal of SCSD's communication work.

"I find that once we are out of the school district, we have no idea what is going on. It is tough to support any measures when we are in the dark. SCEF is also not reaching out to the alumni family." – San Carlos Resident

"The District should participate in events like the San Carlos Farmers' Market, send physical letters to new residents as a welcome and ask if they would like to opt in to a community newsletter or follow the district online, etc." – San Carlos resident

"I would encourage SCSD to distribute information about the good work that it's doing, how well the children are performing, community service projects...Too often, I hear only about...all the complaints and discord...." – San Carlos resident

SCSD's Strongest Communications are about the Big Picture - Funders and parents reported being impressed with the number of "big picture" conversations the district engages in. For most, these conversations give them an inkling of what sets SCSD apart, and its competence and innovations in the larger education field. These conversations are models for the types of interactions that make community members feel "involved" and "up-to-date." Also, nearly everyone appreciated that the district informs them about upcoming SCSD board meetings in separate and timely emails.

"One of the things that I really appreciate about this district is that when it comes to standard communications...like around LCAP or Common Core... we communicate early and have standard decks that go out to all the school sites. We are on the cutting edge in this regard, and we have a strong process to disseminate required communications in a timely way." – Member of PTA Coordinating Council

"...48-hour notice about a board meeting is not enough time to secure a sitter to attend a meeting." – SCSD Parent

Communications Come too Late – Among parents and community partners, there is a definite sense that SCSD takes too long to communicate about key happenings in the district. This raised repeated concerns about rumors, school crises and the way funds are being spent at various school sites. SCSD community partners and school-site staff reported feeling the brunt of this impact, and having to be the ones defending the district in several instances, often without talking points or similar guidance.

The bottom line is that if parents are the ones bringing up an issue, SCSD will already be on the back foot, and will be perceived as being defensive. The result is community partners and parents feeling like “objects” to be talked at, rather than “agents” in their schools.

Being proactive in communications – at both the district and school site levels – is a necessity for SCSD to succeed. Doing so will bring district communications out of a “crisis containment” mode to a place where they have the space to laud the district’s thought leadership and achievements. In addition, communicating about projects well in advance of their kick off will help walk parents through the time that it takes to get things done in the public school system. It will breed both patience and good will. Easily accessible, updated dashboards for several of SCSD’s initiatives were requested to meet this need.

“With lack of information, people make things up and rumors get started...More information is better and, sometimes, even if there is no answer, a communication that says “we are working on this” would be well received...” – Member of the PTA Coordinating Council

“It comes off as if they’re hiding something, and that’s always an underlying current in our conversations with parents.” – Member of the PTA Coordinating Council

“No one wants to be the parent that finds something out at Trader Joe’s.” – SCSD Parent

“When I talk to other parents, it’s almost like the Land of Oz – people are wondering ‘what is the wizard doing?’” – PTA Representative

“It would be nice to get some clear and true information from the school district when these things come up without having to dig for it and hear several different versions

Stakeholders are Confused Between SCSD, SCEF and Partners – The public does not understand how SCSD works with its various partners, or, in some cases, that they are partners at all. While district and community leaders are happy with how these relationships are working internally, they are creating unnecessary/unintentional divisions and, in some cases, split loyalties among stakeholders.

The confusion stems in part from familiar faces being involved in several different parts of the SCSD puzzle, i.e. people wearing several hats. In addition, there is no clear messaging / tagline about the role of SCEF, for example, vis-à-vis SCSD, which would make clear that it’s a separate organization dedicated to serving funders and collecting donations for SCSD. A last component of this is the mixing of logos in

prominent spaces. For example, there is no SCSD logo on the district's website, but logos for SCEF, SMART-E and Healthy Cities Tutoring are prominently displayed. A single image or graph of some sort that shows how each key partner fits into the puzzle, including the school district, may be a simple way to address this confusion.

"Back to School night has the largest turnout of community for San Carlos schools, and the one consistent message that parents get on that night is from SCEF, not the district. Everyone sees the SCEF video. There should be an SCSD video that talks about our vision for education." – Board Member

"The PTA handles a lot of the district's communication efforts, and that is a huge risk factor. For one, the learning curve on these jobs is massive, and you can't afford turnover of volunteers. For another, this has led to awkward situations in the past where the PTA is holding crisis meetings for parents ..." – Community Partner

Funders Want SCSD to Communicate About their Relationship - Like other stakeholders, funders want to share more about SCSD's successes with their internal teams. In addition, they also want SCSD to be more outspoken than it currently is about their support and the issues that they are helping to tackle for the district. They would like to see, at a minimum, their logo visible on SCSD's website. Funders would also like to be kept in the loop as to how and when their name will be used by SCSD.

Funders are also willing to have their communications teams work directly with SCSD to amplify some of its innovations to other funders, their own employees and the public at large.

"Someone forwarded me a newsletter to say 'I hear you are funding this at the SCSD.' Nobody came to me in advance to ask about that being published in there."
– Corporate Funder

"As a funder, we have a responsibility to communicate to the residents. We need to let taxpayers know where the funding is going. We need to be more visible on SCSD's website and in their communications." – Community Funder

SCSD Needs Targeted Communications for its ELL Community – The district currently has 284 English language learners in its student community, nearly half of whom are Spanish speakers. As it currently stands, most parents of ELLs are not receiving information specific to their child's school in their native language (e.g. the school site newsletter.) The district translates materials regarding the ELL designation itself, the initial Infosnap enrollment, and free/reduced lunch.

But the issue is not primarily one about translations. In fact, I didn't hear from any parents asking for a specific language or item to be translated. Instead, ELL parents are looking for different types of information about the schools and need to be reached in different geographical areas of the community. Having this information would help them understand how they can engage with schools. For example, ELL parents talked about needing a separate presentation about how schooling more generally works in the United States, since many of them did not grow up in this system.

To meet this need, SCSD could coordinate with the County and other districts to meet these parents with information where they are, rather than having them come all the way to school sites to receive it.

"We translate the bare minimum required by the state, and no more, really." – SCSD Staff

"The Tinsley student communications issue is not just a language barrier. It's largely a geographic issue." – Elementary School Principal

SCSD'S COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

There are several communication channels that could be leveraged and should be considered when creating a communications plan for the district.

1. **SCSD's superintendent has a powerful voice.** Funders appreciate being able to engage with the superintendent directly, and like to have him put his name on something / speak for them. In addition, community members and parents appreciate being able to reach him with their concerns. Dr. Baker's role in the field and his experience with education reform is less well known among the current set of SCSD parents, but he is well respected in the field.
2. **Word of mouth can be SCSD's most powerful tool.** Given the size – both in terms of population and geography – of San Carlos, good and bad news spreads fast. In addition, because so many community members volunteer in our schools, there are many voices speaking about SCSD and what's happening in classrooms. Each of these community members is a potential ambassador for SCSD's work.

To this end, it should be noted that SCSD's stakeholder community wants the district to shine. Instilling a sense of pride and goodwill in our residents will do quite a bit to raise SCSD's profile, including in the thought leadership space. The more SCSD is able to delight parents and support funders with stories of success, the more "buzz" it will create. SCSD already has several layers of people wanting to talk about the district's accomplishments. They are waiting to hear the information and find out how they can play a role in distributing it.

3. **SCSD has not historically leveraged teacher voices.** While communication is not the primary role of teachers, having strong communications with parents is key to their ability to affect their students. They are also potential storytellers about SCSD in the education practitioner space. Thus far, however, they have received minimal guidance on how or what to communicate to elevate the district's profile and priorities.
4. **SCSD is ahead of its peers on social media, but lacks consistency.** SCSD has a well established presence on Facebook and Twitter, as do several SCSD school sites. However, given its size and target audience, the social media following and engagement comes up short. SCSD has just over 700 followers, while Redwood City has nearly 1,500. SCSD does, however, have nearly double the number of followers of the San Mateo County Office of Education.

The most social media engagement ever with SCSD was on a Facebook post about the reveal of the Arroyo mascot. The post had a terrific teaser headline that encouraged clicks and the content instilled pride and school spirit amongst parents and students. Also, when SCSD staff and board members use their personal pages to promote what's happening in the district, the posts tend to get "a lot more attention and action," according to SCSD communications staff.

Increasing the district's social media presence seems to be more about reminding people of the resource rather than significant changes to the content . At the moment, only half of the school site pages link back to the district's social media pages at all. When asked, SCSD board members couldn't say for sure whether the school district had a Facebook page at all. To keep them top of mind, social media posts should be consistent and visual.

5. **SCSD's website is used primarily to find in-depth information about specific district projects.** Most people like the website's look and feel, and use it to dig deeper for information about things they've heard about elsewhere, e.g. construction projects or enrollment. Very few people see the website as a way to engage or "collaborate" with the district, which was one of the original goals set out for the website reboot. In addition, maintaining the website appears to be a lot of work, as described by SCSD staff. Lastly, according to some PTA representatives, "[t]he District's newsletter submission process is broken. I don't even bother to use it any more."
6. **School site communications are the most effective tool currently being used to talk about SCSD.** Weekly school newsletters sent by email are the most common source of information for parents. Parents like the newsletter's ability to focus big picture concepts on what is happening in their particular school with their own child. That said, letters in backpacks remain the most surefire way to reach all parents, though they are a relatively cumbersome and expensive way of doing things.

SCSD'S CORE MESSAGES

SCSD is working on several innovative programs that could serve as talking points in their own right. These include professional development, project-based learning, habits of mind, integrated math pathways, SCSD's approach to homework, etc. They all represent significant shifts in the field of education, and learning opportunities for the district and parents.

Explaining these changes with solid SCSD examples would position the district as a thought leader among practitioners, would attract funding dollars to SCSD schools and would instill an understanding about the unique value of an SCSD education for the district's parents. Thus far, the following two reference points are the ones being used most often to explain SCSD's educational approach.

SCSD Strategic Plan

The strategic plan document is the anchor communications tool for all SCSD stakeholders. Board members, principals and PTA representatives alike refer people back to this document to answer questions and to learn more about the district all the time. Little snippets of the strategic plan also come out through the principals' messages in newsletters, and are tied back to the children directly, which parents seem to like.

However, the vast majority of SCSD stakeholders have never read through the document. It is a long, complex narrative that requires time and the ability to parse through education theory to understand. Instead, the strategic plan needs to speak to the lowest common denominator among parents - those who are not engaged or have no interest. They are the hardest to reach, but need to have this information.

Lastly, even those who've read the document have trouble relating it to what they're seeing in classrooms. The milestones identified in the strategic plan aren't found anywhere else, and there's no sense of which milestones have been met or how far along the district is in terms of implementation.

"I've been hearing about the vision and strategic plan, and I don't hear progress. How is personalized learning actually happening? Where is the dashboard?"
– SCSD Board Member

Whole Child

SCSD's focus on the whole child is nearly universally perceived as being a unique and positive aspect of the district. The importance of building an all-round student and spending time and resources on non-academic skills is highly valued by parents, funders and the educational field. But in describing what the "whole child" means, definitions varied greatly. This is partly due to a lack of easy-to-reference context

regarding this aspect of the education priorities. While it is included in the strategic plan, the material is dense and difficult to convey to others. As a key part of the education system in San Carlos, more needs to be done to convey this concept in a succinct and consistent manner.

"The district seems to just 'tag on' the nutritional and health component into their plans and communications. It needs to be clear to parents that wellness is as important and part of the kids' education as math class." – Community Partner

SCSD IS A LIGHTHOUSE BECAUSE....?

The following quotes cover the variety of responses I received when asking about what makes SCSD unique. Note (1) the overwhelming focus on community volunteers in schools and (2) the limited focus on innovation in education reform.

1. "Engaged, passionate parents and community members make all the difference."
2. "SCSD is forward thinking and focused on equity."
3. "Health and wellness has really been embedded in SCSD's curriculum and strategic plan."
4. "SCSD doesn't have a lot of money, but is able to do a lot with what they have. That's made their work very strategic."
5. "We are unique in terms of how active and supportive the community is in schools, and how we leverage that, given our really tight budget to help prepare students for the world they will be working in when they mature."
6. "SCSD truly focuses on the whole child and takes a holistic approach to education."
7. "We are doing 21st century and critical thinking work, and have developed strong examples of how this is working – from professional development to personalized learning."
8. "SCSD's schools have a small town feel that engenders trust."
9. "SCSD does amazing things with what we have. We are a good investment that gives funders lots of bang for their buck, because we achieve so much with our community's support."
10. "This is a district where teachers get to be teachers."

Again, a tagline of sorts is needed to rally SCSD's supporters with consistent messages. A structured, cohesive communications plan should achieve just that, and would be coordinated around this message.