



WILLIAMSBURG  
JAMES CITY COUNTY  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT REPORT

## STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PREPARED BY HUNTER COMMUNICATIONS LLC  
JUNE 2017

# COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT REPORT

## Strengths, Opportunities for Improvement and Recommendations

*Prepared for Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools  
by Hunter Communications LLC*

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### **Audit Goal**

The goal of this communications audit was to recommend strategies to improve communications at Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools based on an analysis of strengths and opportunities for improvement uncovered through a comprehensive communications audit. The audit recommendations are designed to help WJCC PS improve its communications efforts by identifying and implementing best practices to build and reinforce positive relationships with key stakeholders: employees, families and community members.

### **Methodology**

In May and June 2017, two nationally known experts in school communications assessed WJCC's current communications practices and outcomes, administered the School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCoPE) survey of three audiences, facilitated 10 focus groups and conducted multiple personal interviews.

A comprehensive review of communication materials including print, digital, social media, and news media was conducted. Data were analyzed from the SCoPE surveys, which provided quantitative insight into the effectiveness of the current communications program by families, employees and community members. Focus groups were held with key stakeholder groups including parents, administrative assistants, teachers, principals, support staff, and business and community leaders. Interviews were conducted with senior staff, Superintendent, School Board members, and the Public Relations and Engagement Department staff.

This data provided a solid foundation on which to identify the strengths as well as opportunities for improvement around the communications program and form the recommendations contained within this report.

## STRENGTHS

**S1: Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools is a high-performing school division.** It is one of only 53 school systems (out of 134) in the Commonwealth of Virginia where all schools are fully accredited. As a result, there is a considerable sense of pride in the school system's academic success, which was evident in every focus group conducted. Those interviewed not only pointed to the accreditation status of WJCC PS, but also underscored individual school successes, too, such as *U.S. News & World Report's* naming Jamestown High School as one of the top 30 schools in the state. As one respondent said emphatically, "I would describe it (the school division) as great and high-performing. People are caring and know they are here for the children."

**S2: The school division has done a good job tailoring programs to meet a wide variety of student needs.** Its many opportunities include an elementary International Baccalaureate school (one of only seven in Virginia); Bright Beginnings, a pre-school program that serves children at risk and with identified disabilities or developmental delays; the Pathways Project, a partnership between the school division and the College of William and Mary that provides flexibility for high students through online courses, blended instruction, dual enrollment, Early College, project- and community-based learning, and credit acceleration and recovery; Linc5 that empowers high school students through project-based learning and a focus on leadership and entrepreneurship; and Concourse 9, which has a focus on health and medical science in a framework of project-based learning.

**S3: There is a sense of optimism about the new leadership of WJCC PS.** New beginnings are often looked at with a sense of hope and this was definitely the case in the focus groups as respondents commented on Dr. Herron's positive demeanor and organizational changes to better meet the schools' needs. Respondents on the SCoPE survey also shared comments such as: "Please look for good communicators and trustworthy individuals like Dr. Herron to lead the schools." "The district is making some positive changes that have needed to be fixed. Dr. Herron is a strong leader and a good communicator." Much of the optimistic commentary in the focus groups, particularly with employees, was also punctuated with a corresponding sense of expectation.

**S4: The success of WJCC PS has contributed to its steady growth.** Enrollment in the school division increased by 6 percent over the previous superintendent's tenure and that trend is expected to continue. Enrollment projections predict the division will experience an increase of

1,022 students by 2027. The stellar reputation of WJCC PS is a key reason for its growth. Qualitatively, those interviewed in the focus groups pointed to many reasons for the school system's appeal, including a strong academic track record; the many opportunities available to students both academically and in the extracurricular areas; a strong special education program; a competent, well-educated, caring staff; and Williamsburg-James City County's attractiveness, i.e. many amenities, central location, temperate climate, etc.

**S5: Parents feel that schools do a good job communicating with them.** Overall, parents feel positive about the communication they receive from their child's school. On the SCoPE survey, parents highly rated communication from their child's school, especially in the areas of understanding and accuracy. They also rated highly (although to a slightly lesser degree) the timeliness, openness, transparency and trustworthiness of school-level communications.

Parents also reported positive feelings about the communications they receive from their child's teacher in all areas surveyed through SCoPE, especially in understanding, accuracy, trustworthiness, openness and transparency. In terms of two-way communication, parents generally agree that school-level communication meets their needs and preferences for receiving information and that they have sufficient opportunities to become involved in division and school committees, task forces and other events.

**S6: All three groups -- parents and families, employees and community members — reported they were able to understand and easily recognize the communication they received from the school division.** Focus group participants also pointed to the many communications mechanisms the district employs to communicate important messages - emails from central office, School Board minutes/BoardDocs, the division website, information blasts via phone and email. the TV channel and the newest addition to the WJCC PS communications infrastructure, Peachjar, a resource that allows interested employees and parents to access online flyers.

**S7: The school system has consistency in its electronic communications program.** The division website and its school sites are highly consistent in terms of design and features, so the impression is that WJCC PS is a school system rather than a system of schools. The division's Twitter and Facebook channels are timely, up-to-date and highly visual - a good mix of big-picture school division news and school news. The division uses an engaging strategy that offers visitors the opportunity to easily share the division's/schools' good news posts via their own social media channels - Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Tumblr as well as through email.

**S8: A comprehensive plan exists for divisionwide communication efforts.** A multi-year plan grounded in the National School Public Relations Association's Rubrics of Practice for School Communications provides for realistic goals and measures that will move the WJCC communications program toward an exemplary one. Additionally, the plan contains research from the 2015 Engagement Survey and is aligned with the current WJCC strategic plan.

**S9: WJCC PS performs well in the area of crisis communications.** School system leadership -- School Board members, senior staff and principals -- expressed a high level of confidence in the Public Relations and Community Engagement Department's crisis communications capabilities. They noted this as a major strength of the director describing her as very responsive and a good ear when the need arises to talk through how to handle a crisis or thorny issue. Auditors reviewed crisis debriefs and talking points, which indicate a comprehensive approach to crisis communications management.

**S10: There is strong desire to connect with the community and vice versa.** The school division has a community engagement coordinator who runs a Parent Academy. A committed Education Foundation is hard at work. For a number of years, WJCC superintendents have had a community advisory committee in place. The schools mirror that commitment with their own volunteer and business partnership programs. In the community focus groups, participants voiced the desire to connect even more holistically and strategically than they do now.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

**OFI 1: Internal communication strategies and tools are needed to ensure that employees are well informed about the priorities, programs and successes of the school division.** According to the SCoPE survey data, WJCC employees come in contact with more than 5,000 parents and community members every week. School employees, who are ambassadors for WJCC, are one of the most credible sources of information about the school division. A proactive internal communications program will provide WJCC employees with the skills and information to share the good news and key messages of the school system.

The lack of an organized internal communications system has resulted in a number of missteps in areas, such as poorly timed or incomplete information regarding longevity steps, an insurance surcharge, and the new MUNIS system. This has caused some mistrust among employees.

Administrative assistants report feeling like they are the last to know about changes that impact both employees and parents, and want to be able to support the school division in changes. They are often the first line of contact with stakeholders and can be extremely helpful in sharing key messages of the school division. Instead, they report confusion and feeling left out of the loop.

Teachers, in particular, felt initiatives were often poorly explained and poorly timed, and that there is a disconnect between the reality of what goes on in the schools and what is pushed down to them. Moreover, employees don't feel well informed about School Board decisions and actions and would benefit from regular communication especially about those decisions and actions that directly impact their jobs or schools.

Principals noted that they work hard to be supportive of the division, but feel they are not getting all the information they need to be effective. As one said, "We can be the salesmen, but we need to know what to sell." Principals also shared that if families think they should have information and principals aren't aware of it, then that situation can create a trust issue. Likewise, principals feel on the defensive if parents know information that principals haven't heard yet, such as a change in the math program.

**OFI 2: A consistent need was cited across all audiences for more consistent and frequent two-way communication opportunities.** There is a consistent recognition among employees,

families and community of the leadership transition currently underway in WJCC that was both hopeful and expectant of some significant communication changes, particularly in the area of two-way communication. Dr. Herron's leadership was often cited as integral to making positive change, particularly in the area of ensuring that communication would be clear, consistent and ongoing. However, employees were adamant that more consistent and frequent two-way communication needs to happen between central office and employees.

Overall, employee respondents on the SCoPE survey rated two-way communication low, especially in the area of feeling that their input and opinion are welcome and valued. Likewise, employees in the focus groups echoed the same sentiment that opportunities for feedback were limited. Generally, employees rated their satisfaction with communication from school/district and their perception of WJCC based on the communication they receive as only a little higher than average.

Moreover, employee respondents to the SCoPE survey didn't feel that the district has a good reputation for handling faculty/staff questions, complaints or concerns, or that their questions, complaints or concerns were resolved to their satisfaction.

While parents generally agree that school communication meets their needs and preferences for receiving information, parents feel less positive about whether their input and opinion are welcome and valued, and whether they have sufficient opportunities to provide input, voice their opinion and advocate for their child.

**OFI 3: District-level parent communications are sparse and need to be consistent and frequent.** While parents noted the understandability and recognizability of district-level communications when they receive them, there is a clear need to increase the consistency and frequency of these communications.

Compared to school-level and teacher-level communications about which parents feel generally positive, parent respondents of the SCoPE survey rated district communications lower overall, especially in the areas of openness, transparency, trustworthiness and timeliness.

Additionally, parents reported low satisfaction with communication about district finances, goals, and plans; and cited the school division website, social media, and local news coverage among their least preferred mode of communications.



**OFI 4: Standardization of expectations is needed for teacher-level communication about student progress.** SCoPE survey parent respondents generally reported positive feelings about the communications they receive from their child’s teacher, however, there exists a need for consistent use of the ParentVue tool by teachers. Parents expressed frustration with the inconsistency among teachers in using and keeping this portal up-to-date as a dependable parent communication tool.

One parent noted, “If you are going to use a system like ParentVue, then it should be used consistently at all levels with all teachers. It is my main way of seeing what my kids are doing, what homework they have, and when they have tests/quizzes. The lack of consistency makes it difficult to keep track of their progress and any needs that may arise.”

Another parent noted, “I really have no idea how my 4th grader is doing in subjects until report cards come. I have no idea if intervention is provided to him for his weak areas, feel very disconnected from his school experiences. He does well but because he's "smart enough," there are unaddressed gaps in his learning (i.e., he's not an outlier who needs gifted education or special ed remediation).

**OFI 5: WJCC is missing opportunities to more proactively communicate with key audiences through the local news media.** In the focus groups, there appeared to be a significant frustration internally and externally about the school division’s success rate in “getting the good news out,” especially in the local news outlets.

The auditors reviewed an inventory of *Virginia Gazette* stories supplied by the Director of the Public Relations and Community Engagement for a five-month period (from December 2016 to May 2017). That department had characterized each story as either negative, neutral or positive or in some cases a combination of these assessments. Of the roughly 129 stories, 23 percent were negative, 48 percent neutral and 29 percent positive. The auditors recognize this is only a brief snapshot and the review involved only one media source. While it is notable that for five months the coverage was not as overwhelmingly negative as participants seemed to think it was, the small percentage of positive stories in comparison to the combined percentage of negative and neutral coverage (76 percent) gives credence to stakeholders’ frustration. What may have contributed to the public perception of overwhelmingly dismal news was the weightiness of the negative media coverage. These stories included School Board member conduct, bullying, redistricting, alternative education, some community concern regarding an author as a guest speaker and lawsuits.

It is important to note that all three audiences rated the news media as one of their least relied upon sources of information about WJCC. It is encouraging that stakeholders reported greater satisfaction with school division-operated communications tools because this presents the opportunity to develop a good news strategy that supports the division's key messages. However, the impact of local media cannot be discounted. For some citizens, especially retirees, the news media is likely to be their only source of information about WJCC PS.

**OFI 6: WJCC PS is diverse and growing, which can result in mixed perceptions of the school division based on the socioeconomic status of families.** Focus group participants frequently noted that while as a whole, WJCC is successful academically, there are student subgroups that struggle to meet achievement benchmarks. Some focus group participants mentioned the existence of racial tension within the wider community.

Some believe that the greatest challenge the division faces is effectively serving English language learners and the growing population of homeless students, while others noted that achieving equity among the schools was the biggest hurdle. In fact, many described the image of the division as dependent upon which school their child attends or the side of town in which one resides. Internal stakeholders expressed a frustration that many in the community have not recognized that the intensity and complexity of student needs require increased resources. Often noted was the challenge in attracting and hiring teachers who match the division's student demographics.

The anticipated redistricting process will be an opportunity to address the concerns around equity and emphasize the division's priority focus on this issue.

Also noted was the need to increase translations of written communications into Spanish to ensure that all families receive the same information at the same time. Principals noted that they have to depend on their own staff to handle the translations or use a vendor. Similarly, principals shared that interpreters travel from a distance and the service is unreliable.

**OFI 7: There is a perceived lack of responsiveness by the central office and schools.** In the SCoPE survey, many parents took the time to express their concern about the lack of responsiveness on the part of teachers and school administrators.

Some comments offered were:

- "My low ratings on this survey are directed at Central Office. I have tried calling specific people or emailing them and never get a reply."

- “I have asked for a meeting with the principal about four months ago and have not heard anything from her. I have emails not returned.”
- “My daughter has a 504 plan...I attempted to stay in touch w/ her teachers via email about how she was doing and what we could do to help her. I got “yeah sure” responses but my daughter would tell me, when asked, that nothing had changed. After so much of this I gave up.”

Even at the school board level, an uneasiness was expressed about professional responsiveness. A board member admitted that when a concern was referred to administration for resolution/response there was the feeling that it might get lost “in the ether.”

Principals, likewise, expressed concerns about some lack of responsiveness on the part of central office staff. As one said, “We tell teachers to respond within 24 hours to parents and it would be nice to have the same responsiveness from the central office.” In terms of communications, principals would like to see more proactive outreach to ask about their needs and how they can be better supported.

However, there was acknowledgement of the top leadership transition taking place and hopefulness that responsiveness from central office will improve as a result.

Further, community members sometimes reported schools unresponsive to their interest in volunteering. Community members cited a lack of understanding about where to find information or support for their involvement.

**OFI 8: Varying impact of the division’s strategic plan on employees’ work.** While the school board, senior staff, department heads and some middle managers felt the strategic plan had had some impact on their daily work, the majority of employees interviewed did not feel that way. A few reported being familiar with the plan, but most employees reported not being familiar with it unless they had a role in its success.

Principals report that the plan is a focus for their schools and that they talk about it as part of their school improvement plan. However, most teachers who were in focus group conversations say that it has little or no effect on their daily work.

**OFI 9: Low ranking of school division website and social media as preferred methods of communication.** All three target audiences--families, employees and community--ranked the WJCC website and its social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) as among the least preferred ways to receive communications about WJCC.

In the SCoPE survey as well as in focus groups, participants frequently noted the difficulty in finding information on the school division website as well as on individual school sites.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. **Develop a highly structured internal communications program that informs and engages employees.**

A workforce that is well-informed, has opportunities to ask questions and express concerns, and feels their feedback is crucial to effective operations will be a cadre of ambassadors. Their efforts have the potential to vastly improve the culture and the image of the school division. The audit results underscored a persistent theme: Employees are hungry for information about the organization they serve.

While the Public Relations and Community Engagement Department is the champion for developing a robust communications program, communications is everyone's job throughout the school system and senior staff and their managers must play a key role, too. Therefore, it is recommended that a focused discussion be held among senior staff to identify key issues, program changes and challenges inherent in the 2017-18 school year and to outline the expectations for their communication, including a timeline and a point person(s) for execution. In some cases responsibility may be assigned to the public relations staff. Other times it may be assigned to the responsible department's staff or it may be a cooperative assignment between departments. In those cases when the primary expectation is placed on public relations staff, there should be a corresponding expectation outlined for senior staff to supply the necessary content in a timely manner.

As part of this discussion, it would be advisable to establish a core operating principle to which all commit, such as *Employees will be provided crucial information in a timely and comprehensive manner in every operational area. Even when there are reasons why information cannot be provided immediately, leadership should make every effort to advise staff of a timeline that estimates when they can expect to receive more definitive information.* Such an expectation will allow the superintendent to evaluate the effectiveness on this front for each department.

While the design of an effective internal communications plan rests with the public relations staff with significant input and ownership of senior staff, here are some recommendations to consider:

- Since teachers are the largest segment of the WJCC PS workforce, the superintendent should consider establishing a Teacher Advisory Committee, committing to a regular

meeting schedule (such as bi-monthly or quarterly). The advisory committee could provide input on planned program changes, but a good way to operate would be for the committee to name a chair who could work with the superintendent or chief of staff on the development of an agenda for each meeting.

- Communication tools should be examined for suitability and expansion of use. It is strongly recommended that an internal newsletter be revived for the express purposes of sharing important division-level information with staff and celebrating staff accomplishments. Publishing this monthly would be a worthy timeline; however, a fast-breaking “extra” edition may be prudent during times when the need to communicate is immediate. Also, in such cases using email to distribute the newsletter is preferable as indicated on the SCoPE survey, employees ranked email as the most effective way for them to receive communication.
- School Board action reports immediately following the School Board meetings should be sent to all employees when decisions were made that impact jobs or work-related issues, such as policy changes. This ensures that employees receive the information directly from an official source rather than rumors circulating post-meeting that contributes to confusion and misinformation. Overall summaries or pending issues that the Board will be addressing can be included as part of the regular internal newsletter
- Senior staff should consider ways to expand the feedback opportunities for employees. For example, the newly established newsletter could also be set up as a blog, allowing employees to weigh in on certain stories; forums could be scheduled during budget development and when revisions to health care may be part of the new plan year; or special email addresses could be set up to take questions/concerns on an issue important to employees (such as curriculum revisions, new program start up, redistricting, etc.) with a response promised within an agreed upon time frame.

*(Addresses OFI 1, OFI 2)*

## **2. Create proactive strategies to regularly inform and engage community members.**

Connections need to be reinforced and in some cases, built, to increase the public’s understanding of the strengths and challenges of the school system and to foster increased advocacy. Research shows that when citizens are informed about what is happening in their local schools, they are more supportive of the school system, which can translate to more funding support, increased volunteerism and stronger partnerships.

A cost-effective way to reach the wider community is through a speakers bureau composed of senior staff, key managers and School Board members. Through such an effort, the school system could keep the community apprised of key information, such as redistricting, budget development and planned curricular changes, and, in turn, receive valuable input from the community. It is also beneficial for key staff to attend community meetings, such as the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, where politically active residents meet and discuss topics of community concern. An additional benefit is many members of community and civic organizations are retirees and there is undoubtedly the need to forge a strengthened relationship with this segment of the community. In fact, many attending the community focus groups were retirees who cited their main source of information about the schools as local media, particularly *The Virginia Gazette*.

Another recommended strategy is to publish an insert in the local newspaper several times a year that would carry WJCC news on student and staff successes, as well as provide a balanced discussion of the challenges that the district is facing, for example, the upcoming redistricting. Much of the same information and infographics used in the WJCC Portrait of a Graduate can be used in this insert. Often, a local business sponsor will underwrite the costs of such an insert. WJCC should also consider a regular column placement in *The Virginia Gazette* on WJCC's priorities, programs and successes. The focus group participants pointed out that the College of William and Mary has been provided a feature of this nature and that they felt, considering the local impact of WJCC, this same opportunity should be offered to the school division.  
(Addresses OFI 2, 3, 5)

### **3. Examine the community engagement function in the Department of Public Relations and Community Engagement in an effort to strengthen its outreaches.**

At present, parent engagement efforts are under way through the department's hosting of Parent Academy offerings with local agencies. However, awareness of these efforts, at least among focus group participants, seemed to be low. There appears to be a pressing need to develop a more structured system to engage parents as well as to recruit and manage volunteers. The Parent Academy this past school year studied a critical need: Ensuring student success in middle school, offering three meaningful sessions on that topic. However, the Parent Academy's reach could be expanded if there was more collaboration with agencies in the community whose missions are closely aligned with WJCC PS. These could include for example, local hospitals (which often have community outreach coordinators), pediatric practices, sports medicine practices, psychiatric/mental health practices, Colonial Behavioral Health and the city

and county parks and recreation departments. While parents should be surveyed on their interest areas, the aforementioned organizations are capable of providing experts who can address topics such as autism, eating disorders, substance abuse, helping the disorganized child get organized, gifted learners, mental health services available in the community, avoiding sports injuries, etc. In turn, the school system's part of the partnership could expand the marketing of sessions through its rapid alert email/telephone service, social media channels, news releases and website.

Presently the division strategy behind the recruitment of partners is to direct them to individual schools unless the partnership is with three or more schools, then the contact is the Community Engagement Coordinator. When it comes to volunteers, the school division has a commendable partnership in Big Brothers & Sisters for mentorships. Despite the school division's obvious commitment to this type of community involvement, some in the community focus groups were critical about how their interest in partnerships and volunteering was received. As one participant noted, "The school district is cocooning itself. I have some friends who are retired and they are great people with great insights. But you can't come into the schools if they don't want you to come. "

To reinforce a positive, receptive climate at all schools it is recommended that each school designate a staff member as a partnership/volunteer coordinator and that those individuals be awarded a stipend. To support the schools, the division's Community Engagement Coordinator should be tasked with developing the formal program, job description and expectations that must be met to receive the stipend. It is further recommended that the Community Engagement Coordinator develop mandatory training for the school-based partnership coordinators and that their contact information be placed on the schools' websites so interested individuals easily can reach the right person. This cooperation between central office and the schools will help raise the school system's community connections to a new, more powerful level.

*(Addresses OFI 2, 3)*

#### **4. Develop and implement a plan to give the community a more comprehensive understanding of the new superintendent's immediate and long-range priorities.**

Dr. Herron is well known in the community by virtue of the fact she served WJCC PS as deputy superintendent. However, the community needs to get reacquainted with her in her new role. Dr. Herron has expressed the desire, through her transition plan, to hear firsthand from the



community about its aspirations for public education. Consequently, it is recommended that the Public Relations and Community Engagement staff assist in scheduling a “Listen, Learn, Lead” tour for her. This effort can be designed in a number of different ways -- as a presentation on first-year priorities, long-range plans and challenges with the opportunity for dialogue afterwards, a series of small group conversations about high-interest topics or as school level discussions about plans and challenges. No matter what format the tour takes, an important part of the discussion should be how parents and citizens can be authentically involved.

Additional steps to deepen the leadership-community connection would be to contact community service clubs and civic organizations to assess their interest in hosting Dr. Herron as a speaker at upcoming meetings; scheduling her on local radio and TV talk shows (such as WHRV’s *Hearsay*, for example); arranging a meeting with the editorial boards of the *Virginia Gazette*, *WYDaily*, and *The Daily Press*; and host a “State of the Schools” event for the community. Such strategies as these will provide the community more access to school system leadership which should increase the flow of two-way communication and hence improve transparency.

*(Addresses OFI 2, 3, 5)*

#### **5. Improve the timeliness of division and school level responses to questions, concerns and suggestions expressed by parents and community members.**

The commentary in the focus groups as well as the comments from the survey underscored some frustration with school/division responsiveness.

Moving ahead, the division can use several improvement strategies including: 1) Share the communication audit results and recommendations with principals so they understand the pervasiveness of the issue; 2) Appoint a committee of principals and teachers to develop guidelines to improve school level responsiveness, possibly asking them to set a standard response time frame; 3) Among senior staff and managers adhere to a response protocol of 24 hours. There may be some resistance to this when the issue is complex. However, make it clear an interim response explaining that more time will be needed to resolve the matter is a reasonable approach to problem solving. It is non-responsiveness that is unacceptable; and 4) Assign a point person on senior staff to track the concerns/requests from parents and citizens that board members refer on to administration. This tracking system can be a web-based

document that logs in the concern/request, notes the which staff will respond, and tracks when staff responded.

*(Addresses OFI 1, 2, 7)*

**6. Consider setting expectations and standards for teacher entry of student progress in ParentVue.**

In a few words, the accuracy and timeliness of ParentVue is only as good as the commitment of individual teachers to using the tool effectively. Both in focus groups and on the survey, a considerable number of parents expressed exasperation about this issue.

Considering the potential of this tool to keep parents abreast of their children's progress (or lack thereof), more attention needs to be given on how to increase its value. Therefore, it is recommended that the division name a committee of principals and teachers to develop expectations for teacher use of the resource. It may be that the division needs to expand the scope of the committee to holistically improve the tool. If so, that committee should be enlarged to include parents and the technology staff who manage it.

*(Addresses OFI 4)*

**7. Establish a key communicator program for the division's 15 schools by providing a stipend and media training for school-level staff.**

For the Public Relations and Community Engagement Department to succeed in gathering and pushing out the good news happening throughout the school division, there must be an efficient system in place to feed the news to the department.

A best practice for any key communicator program is to offer selected staff members a reasonable stipend to manage the duties of writing school-based news releases and media advisories to send on to the department for distribution. A stipend would reward staff for the extra effort it takes to publicize important school news, bring a level of accountability to the effort and result in increased visibility of school news. It is also recommended that the Director of Public Relations and Community Engagement train the school-based key communicators in media relations, sound writing techniques and the division of labor between schools and central office in this effort. In fact, attendance at such training should be mandatory for staff who receive a stipend. If managed well, this new structure should increase the publishing and

airing of good news in local media and provide the division with timelier and livelier schools news on its website and social media channels.

*(Addresses OFI 5, 9)*

**8. Continue to examine equity issues in the schools in such a public manner that it helps increase the community understanding of the challenges and a corresponding commitment to help resolving them.**

In the focus groups, participants felt a defining characteristic of WJCC PS was the significant contrast between schools in socioeconomic makeup and resulting needs. The School Board and administration took bold strides this year to enter into hard-hitting conversations about equity through a series of public presentations and conversations about the effectiveness of efforts to serve struggling students. These presentations examined Bright Beginnings, Title I, English Language Learners, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Special Education and Equity Through Engagement. Such conversations need to continue, but in an even more public manner. It is recommended that leadership consider other supporting strategies such as writing opinion editorials in local newspapers, doing presentation(s)/hosting community conversations and expounding on this subject in internal and external newsletters and on the division website.

*(Addresses OFI 1, 2, 5, 6)*

**9. Refresh the current strategic plan in a manner that encourages key stakeholders to weigh in on their aspirations for Williamsburg-James City County public education and use as a framework for key messages.**

The current WJCC PS strategic plan has garnered only a cursory understanding internally and is virtually unknown in external circles. As the school division moves ahead with the update of its current strategic plan, senior staff and the School Board should consider how to best garner input from its stakeholders because ownership is instrumental to awareness and ultimately support. The Public Relations and Community Engagement Department should be tasked with development of a supporting communications and community engagement plan.

- Host focus groups, a larger public forum and/or a survey(s) - or a combination thereof - to obtain input on possible updates. Incorporate the use of social media to engage citizens.
- Brand the plan for easy recognition by stakeholders with a name and a supporting logo.

- Update the web presence to capitalize on the new identity, publishing not only the plan but providing a sense of how it is being executed. For example, include video of teacher work in the classroom, how the community has rallied to support it, how new facilities are supporting it, and progress along the way in goal areas.
- Continue to tie School Board agenda items to strategic plan goals.
- Schedule School Board recognitions of stakeholders whose supporting work is aligned to the strategic plan.
- Highlight employees doing strategic plan work in the internal newsletter.
- Task the Public Relations and Community Engagement Department with developing a communications plan for the strategic plan rollout.

*(Addresses OFI 2, 8)*

#### **10. Expand a well-designed, ongoing customer service training program to all staff.**

While the SCoPE Survey indicated that parents generally agree they feel welcomed when they visit their child's school, there was considerable commentary in the same survey that referenced a lack of friendliness and responsiveness on the part of staff, particularly front-line staff. This indicates inconsistent practices from campus to campus in providing excellent customer service. Some of these comments included:

- "Needs to be more welcoming front office for students and parents/visitors of the school."
- "In many of your schools, the front office is disengaged. I understand they are working at a desk and might assume people/parents know what they are doing but with each person, they should engage in communication. They should make eye contact, welcome them to the school or at least ask if they need assistance...Maybe a communication seminar or a class before school starts and how to welcome people should be addressed."
- "... some of the office staff do not seem to care about possessing the proper tools for providing a welcoming and supportive environment..."
- "I strongly do not feel welcome when I visit my child's school to have lunch with him. When I come into sign in, I hear the ladies in the front office talking negative about parents."

Research has shown that when schools are perceived as unfriendly, unresponsive or even intimidating places, parents are less likely to be involved. More robust training in how to greet visitors, telephone etiquette, written communications and conflict resolution will help reinforce a welcoming culture throughout the school system, including in central administration. Before

the training program is refreshed, however, a “mystery shopper” evaluation is recommended to identify specific areas needing targeted training.

*(Addresses OFI 7)*

**11. Commit to improving transparency by communicating more frequently and holistically on important issues that have the potential to have meaningful impact on stakeholders.**

On the parent/family survey and the employee survey “Communication about district finances and related issues” received the lowest satisfaction rating. On the community survey, it was one of the lowest ranked items. While many focus group participants felt like there had been an improvement in this area under new leadership, they also voiced an expectation for increased transparency. To meet these expectations, senior staff needs to take inventory of the issues of high impact in each of their respective operational areas and work with the Public Relations and Community Engagement Department to ensure clear, consistent and concise communications. There are two issues that are significant enough to merit their own recommendations here -- redistricting and finance.

In interviews, both senior staff and School Board members acknowledged there is considerable community concern about redistricting, especially on an impending decision whether or not to add high schools into redistricting plans. One survey comment from a parent seemed to sum up the prevailing climate: “Additionally, I do have anxiety about the new middle school -- we chose our house specifically based on the matching needs of our children with the culture of the school, and not being able to anticipate whether or not my children will be required to switch schools is very upsetting. As early as information can be provided regarding boundaries (before it is set in stone), we would really appreciate hearing the details.” Information does exist on the WJCC website, but additional outreach is needed to provide the community with more knowledge. Strategies to consider are:

- Set up a redistricting web page and committing to making it the “go to” source for the most up-to-date information.
- Give the page an identity such as *The Lowdown on WJCC Redistricting* or *The Latest on WJCC Redistricting*.
- Include content such as current rationale, answers to the most frequently asked questions (including the status of the most anticipated issue of whether or not high school redistricting will become part of the plan), the anticipated timeline for decision-making, background on the consultant, links to School Board discussions, a schedule of

input opportunities and a special email address where citizens can send questions and receive a response within 48 hours.

- When this page is ready, introduce it by sending all-staff and all-family emails with a link to it, explaining this is how the division will be sharing critical.
- Create a media strategy using both traditional and social media to extend outreach of the new information resources.

On the subject of finance, the same strategies outlined above are applicable. Again, the key is developing an identifiable web presence that is positioned as the “go to” source and that is regularly updated and sent to stakeholders and that includes an opportunity for two-way input. *(Addresses OFI 3, 5, 7)*

## **12. Refresh current communication tools and consider the implementation of new ones.**

The school division’s website is written in clear, concise language and is largely jargon free. Yet despite those attributes, this tool received a low effectiveness rating on the parent/family survey. Contributing factors may be organization and positioning of the information. Survey comments and focus group discussion referenced some difficulty in finding information. Auditors had a similar experience in its review of the site. For example, with community outreach pages, auditors found the content was good, but the placement was under the department with operational responsibility, not under the heading “Community,” which is the logical place residents and those new to the area would look to first. The suggestions for improvement that arose most frequently in the audit were the need to have a directory page populated with individual contact information and an expanded school calendar that is more prominently placed.

The research gathered from this audit is a good start toward planning a refresh of the website. Additionally, qualitative input through web user groups are also advisable. User groups are tasked with finding specific information on the website and provide an evaluation of the user experience of the website’s content and organization. Together this information could be instrumental in a redesign that would result in improving the division website as a relied upon source of information.

In the area of social media, the school division’s content includes compelling features such as livestreams of graduations and photos of students and teachers. However, WJCC social media content needs to move beyond a one-way information push and engage audiences in

opportunities to share and connect. For example, Twitter hashtag campaigns that engage audiences in a timely way can generate interest and excitement, such as #gradwishes to encourage parent and community to post well wishes to the new graduates as they begin a new phase of their lives. Or #firstdayWJCC to encourage parents, students and teachers to post photos and comments chronicling the first day of school.

Additionally, positive local media stories can also be retweeted and posted to extend their reach and ensure that WJCC followers also read the stories.

The auditors' review of individual school social media feeds found consistent use of Twitter by most schools, and of those schools who use it regularly, the posts also tend to be one-way push of information. The same recommendation of using two-way communication strategies also applies to schools' use of Twitter to increase engagement with their families and staff.

Another way to engage audiences would be to include more video and photographic content highlighting student and staff successes. To encourage more video and photo contributions, consider equipping school key communicators with cameras or mobile devices with high resolution cameras.

Also needed is a division-level external newsletter targeted toward families and distributed via e-mail. Currently, there is not a regular communications tool that is pushed toward families from the division. Both in focus groups and in the SCoPE survey, families indicated a desire for more and better information from the school division.

Another strategy to consider is developing a listserv feature on the website where individuals can subscribe to receive information such as news releases, school menus, school board minutes/summaries, school calendar updates, etc.

*(Addresses OFI 2, 3, 9)*

### **13. Provide School Board members with additional tools to help them in their advocacy efforts.**

In interviews with School Board members, it became apparent they could benefit from anticipatory communications support rather than them having to ask for assistance when a need arises. While School Board members are knowledgeable about big-picture issues, they

often need a greater level of operational detail to equip them to answer questions from their constituents.

Therefore, it is recommended that a School Board Member ToolBox be developed that would include fact sheets and powerpoint presentations on important topics such as budget, redistricting, the strategic plan, equity, specific program changes, etc. The toolbox should be updated regularly to align with ongoing developments. Board members should be polled to determine what additional information, besides these topics, needs to be included.

*(Addresses OFI 2, 3, 6, 8)*

#### **14. Increase staffing of Public Relations and Community Engagement Department.**

This audit report contains some significant recommendations that will require either a reallocation of current resources or an addition of resources to enable the Department to achieve these new goals of improved internal and external communication. The auditors recommend adding one new generalist position to the Department, which could assume primary responsibility for two new newsletters (one internal, one external), and coordination of the school-based key communicator program. This position would also serve as back-up to the Director in her absence in case of a crisis or emergency situation. Having an additional communications position will be critical to the success of the division as it moves forward with the intensive work around redistricting.

With the addition of a new generalist position, WJCC would have four professionals dedicated to the communications effort. This recommendation is in line with staffing models at other school divisions with excellent communication programs.

*(Addresses all OFIs)*