

Communications Study
for the
Coxsackie-Athens Central School District

Conducted by the



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Introduction

The Coxsackie-Athens Central School District is committed to exploring ways to improve communication with its parents, staff and residents, as evidenced by its decision to contract for this communications study. Questar III's Communications Service conducted this study at the request of Coxsackie-Athens Superintendent Dr. Earle Gregory. Few school districts engage in this process of exploring ways to improve communications, and the Coxsackie-Athens Board of Education is to be applauded for their courage in engaging in this endeavor.

Throughout focus group meetings with community stakeholders, it was obvious to the consultants that Coxsackie-Athens residents feel strongly about public education.

This study provides an independent review, or a snapshot, of the Coxsackie-Athens Central School's current communications program from an "outside" perspective. The goal was to provide district officials with information and feedback regarding the effectiveness of its communications efforts, identification of gaps and recommendations for improving future communications.

The observations and recommendations contained in this communications study should be carefully reviewed. Whenever opinions or perceptions are solicited about an educational institution and its work, there is a tendency to dwell on perceived problem areas rather than to discuss what the school system does well. This is expected.

One of the objectives of this "perception study" was to help the school district view itself through the perception of others so it can make improvements. We encourage those who read the report not to dwell on these perceived problems, but rather to focus on next steps or possible solutions for improvement.

It is important to make a distinction between this Communication Study and a Communications Plan. The goal of a study is to examine what currently exists and to recommend actions that can be taken to address the issues identified. A Communications Study is *not* prepared with the expectation that "instant" implementation occurs of any items identified as needing attention.

A Communications Study *is* designed to create the support for the development of a Communications Plan that strategically identifies what will be done, who will do it, when it will occur, and how it will occur. A Communications Plan must be closely aligned with other school district plans. The resources (human and capital) necessary to implement the Plan should be clearly identified and supported by decision makers.

Procedures and Processes

Questar III's Communications Service held face-to-face discussions with key audiences to probe their perceptions of the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District and to listen to their opinions.

Questar III conducted two planning meetings and five on-site stakeholder focus groups with internal and external audiences. These sessions included: parents, community members, faculty/staff and a student representative (September 23, September 30 and October 8, 2009); school administrators (June 23, 2009); and Board of Education members (July 8, 2009). A representative of Questar III's Communications Service facilitated each of these meetings.

The following constituency groups participated in the forum process: C-A Teachers' Association, Village of Athens, Village of Coxsackie, C-A Clerical Unit, EJA Elementary PTO, Town of Coxsackie (councilman), Coxsackie Chamber of Commerce, representative of Teaching Assistant/Teacher Aides, Custodian representative, Coxsackie Police, Booster Club, Athens Fire Department, High School Student Council, Greene County IDA, Town of New Baltimore (councilwoman), Coxsackie Elementary PTO, C-A Administrators and the Board of Education.

Each group was specifically asked to comment about the effectiveness of the school district's communications efforts (i.e., content, design, approach, timeliness, and delivery method). Their perceptions were based on answers to a series of questions the consultants posed to each individual at the sessions.

These questions included:

1. What needs to be done to make the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District the best source of information about the district?
2. How can the engagement of the public be utilized in the most efficient and effective fashion?
3. What is the best way to make sure that communication about the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District is occurring on a regular basis?
4. What resources will the school district need to make sure that a commitment can be made towards enhanced communications?

Consultants also reviewed a sampling of the district's printed materials, which were collected and provided by the district. These internal and external materials were carefully reviewed from a reader's perspective to gauge their effectiveness.

These materials included: Calendar/Handbook, 2008-2009; Strategic Plan, 2007-2012; District at a Glance; Volume III of Dashboard Lights; the Weekly Update sent to the Board of Education; Across the Board; materials related to the December 16,

2008 capital project vote (tri-fold brochure, fact sheet, FAQ, etc.); budget newsletter and other publications; and various school newsletters.

A meeting was also requested by Superintendent Earle Gregory to review the draft report with the consultant team. Gregory shared his appreciation for the process and discussed initiatives currently underway or planned for the future once the report was finalized. He noted concerns that some of the initiatives underway may not have been considered or known about by the community and school members who were invited by the District to participate in the Focus Group meetings. The consultant team considered these concerns and modified sections of the report to reflect some of these initiatives, while continuing to note that the Study was based upon a cross section of the perceptions of the community and school personnel.

As a result of a review of these materials and an analysis of the focus group discussions, Questar III's Communications Service has prepared this study.

The consultant team included: Andrew DeFeo, Assistant Superintendent, Questar III BOCES; Tina Grant, Consultant and teacher of English for the Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District; Jason McCord, Questar III Communications Specialist; Daniel Sherman, Lead Communications Specialist, Questar III BOCES; and, Stephanie Campbell, Teacher of Social Studies at Chatham Central School District and Reporter for the Chatham Courier.

Guiding Definition

Questar III's Communications Service is an award-winning member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). It follows NSPRA's definition as a foundation for all school communications programs:

Educational public relations is a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive two-way communications process involving both internal and external publics, with a goal of stimulating a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization. Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support.

Executive Summary

The findings of this communications study are based upon perceptions articulated in focus group meetings held with the school community, as well as a review of the district's communications materials.

Questar III's Communications Service draws upon its record of successfully serving public school districts and its association with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). The department's work is guided by best practices advanced by the organization's national members.

Effective communication can help school districts, like Coxsackie-Athens, solve problems and demonstrate accountability to its school community. As part of this study, we offer a series of recommendations, starting on page 13 of this report.

The following principles are critical to any successful communications program. These best practices should serve as the foundation for the implementation of the study's recommendations.

The district should be the first and best source of information.

The goal of any communications program is to build long-term credibility. To accomplish this goal, school districts need to be timely and forthcoming with its school community. This means communicating with its staff prior to information being released publicly and sharing both good and bad news with the school community. Publications such as the Weekly Update, or "Across the Board" are highlighted as an example of this practice.

All communication efforts must be tied to the district's goals and objectives.

To be effective, communication efforts must be driven by the school district's overall mission, goals and objectives and be designed to support teaching and learning. Communications should focus on where teaching and learning take place — at the building level — and inform the public of progress toward goals. A yearly communications plan should drive these efforts. While the district made a concerted effort to share progress on building-level, technology and special education action plans by posting reports online, it should review website usage data to see if residents are reading these reports. If not, the district could tell the "story" by using other communications vehicles.

A successful communications program needs committed resources.

In an era of transparency, accountability and 24/7 information, communications is a responsibility that districts should not overlook, but the recommendations outlined in this study will be labor intensive to implement. Many districts across the region, state and country have professionals that drive these initiatives and best practices.

Coxsackie-Athens CSD must determine whether the role of communications is one that requires a commitment of resources, or whether the fragmentation of duties is sufficient enough to manage even the current workload split among district staff.

Focus Group Summary

Members of Questar III's Communications Service held five focus group sessions in June, July and September 2009. Focus group participants were asked about their perceptions about the district's communications efforts.

The following are common themes emanating from these sessions. The focus groups, by design, involved a small number of people, that, in the "community" sessions involved both community members and internal staff, and the summary should be reviewed with that in mind. This is not a verbatim report of what was said, but rather a compilation of common themes expressed by focus group participants.

Before summarizing the major themes gleaned from analyzing the focus group summaries, it is important to note a basic premise that emerged from these discussions – pride for Coxsackie-Athens schools and a desire for information. The report's recommendations are offered as ways to ensure continued viability and visibility of existing communications efforts and to address perceived gaps.

Common Themes

1. There needs to be more focused and timely communications emanating from the Central Office and school buildings.

This was a recurring theme identified by district staff and community members. Focus group participants indicated that it was not a desire to have simply more communications, but rather frequent, concise updates on educational and extracurricular matters. The mediums for these communications included the website, newsletters, and face-to-face opportunities.

Participants discussed the school district's "communication style" and the central administration's visibility within the community and responsiveness to time-sensitive issues and opportunities. It was noted that when there was often a need, and an opportunity to respond in a timely fashion (meaning that the community or an individual would have felt acknowledged for their efforts), that there was often a delay or response that left the individual feeling less than appreciated. A "passivity" of response was noted by several of the Focus Forum participants.

While there may be an inclination to associate internal discontent with communications with the status of negotiations, this was not evidenced by the Consultant Team. Focus Group attendees spoke of a desire to have more information shared on a range of topics both internally and externally with the community. They also expressed a desire to have more information flow between buildings about instructional and extracurricular activities.

2. There is no one directly responsible for or dedicated to communications.

One of the most common themes identified by focus group participants is that Coxsackie-Athens CSD lacks a person specifically dedicated to communications. Right now, this role is filled by a variety of staff in the district. Many participants noted an individual with a communications skill set was required to oversee communications, although some expressed concerns with the financial impact or the community's perception of the district adding an employee to fulfill this role.

3. Residents want to see year-round communications.

Focus group participants expressed a desire to see information on schools throughout the year. Some mentioned that the district does a good job communicating right before the (May) budget vote, but indicated that the district needs to make the same effort year-round.

4. There are concerns with the timeliness, accuracy and conciseness with printed communications.

Many members of the focus groups noted that information in newsletters and other communications are not concise or easily understood. Community members expressed the need for an easy-to-understand style that is to the point. They indicated that people have limited time and preferred communications that were "short and sweet." Many residents also expressed frustration about the timeliness of information, noting they felt they were only informed after a decision was made and thereby fostering a feeling of disenfranchisement in the community.

5. The website should be revamped as a news source.

Nearly every member of the focus groups noted that the district website (www.coxsackie-athens.org) is an underutilized communications tool, one not well connected to the community. Participants noted that the website could include links to other community organizations, and the site could include a vehicle for community members to ask questions or provide feedback on current issues. Many said the website should be updated more often, with more information and resources that are pertinent to students, parents and community members. Some focus group participants said information was posted to areas that were difficult to find. Some also noted that Facebook could be used to better engage the public.

6. Board meetings are not perceived as community friendly.

There are misunderstandings within the community regarding the structure, purpose and intent of Board of Education meetings. Board meetings are not perceived as "user-friendly" and focus groups suggested that Board members go to

the community rather than wait for the community to come to them. Focus Group participants viewed the Board as, at times, unapproachable and that the work of the Board in public held little regard for the audience and their desire to understand the Board agenda.

Meetings are seen as difficult to follow and challenging to understand. Community members expressed an interest in obtaining meeting agendas in advance in order to educate themselves on topics of interest. When the Board of Education plans to discuss a topic that will be of particular interest to community members or students, some focus group participants said the Board should attempt to let those affected groups know about the discussion beforehand. Some participants indicated a desire to have more interactions with the Board of Education in a "forum" type environment, like the one used for the Communications Study. Several participants said a student voice on the Board of Education would be beneficial.

7. Internal communications are under utilized.

Focus groups emphasized the effect that poor internal communication has on the external efforts within the community. Teachers are perceived as being good communicators, especially with parents. There is a belief by some members of the community that teachers may have been partially responsible for the failure of the recent bond issue because they were not adequately informed or asked for input. Because many teachers, teaching assistants, and teacher's aides are residents of the towns of Coxsackie or Athens, their ability to share information was seen as paramount.

8. The district should reach out to different constituency groups.

The community-based focus groups noted that the school district should make a concerted effort to engage a variety of constituent groups. Currently, there is a perception that communication efforts are only targeted toward parents and that other groups could be engaged to help further the goals of the district and enhance the relationship between the school and the community.

Disappointment was expressed on several occasions by Focus Group members that when overtures of support were made to the school district leadership, they received a long listing of questions and qualifications that were needed prior to accepting the support. In one example, a Focus Group participant noted with frustration the discrepancy when two other school districts openly accepted the additional support with gratitude and that it was only the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District that questioned the donation.

Focus group members felt that if under-recognized groups of taxpayers were engaged in school concerns on an ongoing basis, they would be more apt to pass budget votes and bond issues. Such groups include senior citizens, community organizations, and local businesses.

9. The district needs to be more transparent with information, both good and bad.

Many constituent groups noted that the school district needs to be more forthcoming with information, both good and bad. Some noted that some Board decisions are viewed as a “done deal” and that public information – information the public has the right to know – is not shared.

Some focus group members strongly encouraged the district to form a “Communications Committee” comprised of key community leaders who are willing to assist the district in implementing and evaluating future efforts.

10. The district can improve its relationship with the local media.

Another common theme was that the community wanted to see more news about the district and its schools in the local media. Some participants felt that efforts could be made to solicit more coverage in the Daily Mail or other local newspapers.

Review of Communications Materials

Overall, the sample publications submitted by the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District show a need for consistency. Each piece has its own design or look; the district should develop a universal design that will “brand” the publications so readers instantly know it’s from Coxsackie-Athens schools.

Publications should also utilize consistent fonts that are easy to read. The Edward J. Arthur Elementary School (January 2009) newsletter, for example, uses a different font type for each story, including fancy fonts that are difficult to read. Point size is also important, as calendar dates in the Coxsackie Elementary School newsletters, for example, are difficult to read. Word Art and Clip Art look unprofessional and should largely be avoided.

Echoing the comments of participants in communication focus groups, the writing in publications need to be more concise and structured, so the most important information is included first. The Strategic Plan brochure, for example, lists the purpose of the strategic plan in the last paragraph of the opening letter. Similarly, the budget letter mentions the tax levy increase in the last paragraph. All writing should be done with the mindset that the average reader won’t spend more than a few minutes on a publication.

Nearly all articles should focus on what is going on in schools with a particular focus on academic success and challenges facing the district. The Edward J. Arthur Elementary School newsletter (January 2009), for example, features a cartoon and a word search puzzle. Instead, there should be more information about what’s going on in schools. The Coxsackie Elementary School newsletter (January 2009) includes an article providing good context to New York State tests and brief reminders on important announcements such as winter clothing and winter weather advisories. Another good example is the story in the District Newsletter about a grant for new boilers; the story is brief, to the point, and illustrates a good theme - the district’s commitment to being wise with school taxpayer dollars.

Publications need to be balanced to show not only the successes but also the challenges facing Coxsackie-Athens schools. The budget letter accomplishes this to some extent, discussing the impacts of retirements, etc. But publications such as the budget newsletter would appear more objective if they included honest assessments of decisions (such as how classroom sizes would be impacted if the district had to reduce the number of class sections).

Language should be simple, avoiding jargon such as “steeped in the latest research” in the Strategic Plan brochure. All language should be objective as well; the 2008 bond referendum brochure, for example, states “Invest in Our Kids – Now Is the Time” which could be perceived as advocating for the plan. Similarly, the brochure says, “the current plan is not grandiose,” which is a judgment. Likewise is the statement in the budget letter that the district has prepared “a reasonable

budget.” A more effective approach would be to explain the plan or budget objectively and let the community decide.

Publications like the Weekly Update or “Across the Board” do a good job of sharing information in a timely fashion with its intended audience, internal staff. The district should consider expanding its publication to the website, so a larger audience has access to information already prepared by the district several days after a Board meeting.

The district should carefully review copy for mistakes as even minor errors can appear glaring to readers. The first paragraph of the budget letter, for example, states the district “paired” down the budget, when it should be “pared”. Lengthy web addresses should also be avoided, such as the March 2009 District Newsletter that features an 80-character URL; instead, refer the reader to the school website where a convenient link is posted.

A number of publications included letters from administrators which should largely be avoided, particularly as the front page of newsletters. The budget newsletter, for example, would be more effective if instead of a whole page letter from the Superintendent there were shorter articles explaining the challenges facing the district. Letters from individuals can often be viewed as biased as readers expect the writer of a budget letter, for example, to support the budget. It would be more effective to outline the facts in a narrative format and let the reader decide.

Photos should be used in all school publications; the lack of photos in the budget newsletter is particularly striking. Photos should also reinforce key district messages such as students studying in class and using technology. The District Calendar, for example, features almost exclusively photos of students posing for photos outside of classrooms. More natural shots of students engaged in their school work would more effectively reinforce student learning. Similarly, large group shots should generally be avoided in exchange for tighter shots of students. Photos should also reinforce the message of the publication. The 2008 bond referendum brochure, for example, showed a student working at a table and students in a grassy field; photos of students studying in hallways or locker rooms – which the brochure mentions is a concern – would illustrate the district challenges more effectively.

Often, publications utilize bulleted lists for accomplishments while articles would be more effective. In the Annual Report, for example, there is an entire page of bulleted “Points of Pride.” Four or five short stories with a few photos of student accomplishments would be more engaging for a reader.

Contact information should always be provided for those with questions. In the Annual Report, for example, the superintendent asks individuals to contact him with questions but no phone number or e-mail address is listed. Most of the publications do a good job of listing the school website prominently, an important consideration.

Recommendations

Create an annual, strategic communications plan.

For a school communications program to be effective, it must be a comprehensive, planned and systematic effort designed to foster better understanding and recognition of the school district's mission, goals, challenges and accomplishments. An annual communications plan would entail the district's communication objectives, strategies and individuals responsible for reaching the stated goals.

Once the district prepares a communications plan, it is important to incorporate research and evaluation into the process. While this study provides a starting point, additional research, such as readership surveys on publications, should be completed. This plan should be updated each year, taking time to analyze the strategies and goals set the prior year so the district can make adjustments to meet its stated goals.

A strategic communications plan would help address many of the themes expressed by focus group participants. Specifically, it would help address so-called perceived gaps in year-round communications. While the district provides a number of written publications throughout the year, it would benefit from more targeted communications to ensure that specific audiences receive information they may not be getting now for one reason or another. Likewise, the district should take the opportunity to promote its communications vehicles whenever possible (i.e., newsletter "teaser stories" that drive residents to the website for more information).

Dedicate a single person to plan, coordinate and manage the school district's communications program.

One of the most common themes expressed by focus group participants was that Coxsackie-Athens lacked a position or individual dedicated to the role of communications.

A strategic approach to school communications relies on a proactive, not reactive, approach. Many districts across the region and state have a communications professional who manages the school system's communications program. These individuals are responsible for writing/editing, media relations, coaching/consultation, website development and managing/disseminating a variety of communications.

As a point of reference, over half of the districts in the Greene, Columbia and Rensselaer County region have a part-time communications position. Furthermore, a majority of districts in the Albany, Saratoga, Schoharie and Schenectady County area employ at least a half-time position, and many are full-time. Even at these levels, these school districts often struggle to meet the public's increasing demands for real-time information.

A single person dedicated to managing the school district's communications program could easily address some of the gaps identified by focus group participants. Typically, communications professionals are involved whenever important decisions are being made, providing a community relations perspective when issues are discussed.

Ultimately, day-to-day decisions still rest with school administrators, but this communications professional is entrusted with information and empowered to provide insight into how to best engage community groups and disseminate timely and effective communications.

Districts across the region and state have funded these positions either as a staff position or through shared services. However, in light of the current fiscal reality facing districts like Coxsackie-Athens, it is up to the Board of Education and administration to align their expectations to the level of communications support they can fund at this time.

Ensure a consistent, frequent system of internal communications.

Internal communications support external communications efforts. A strong emphasis should be placed on expanding and strengthening internal communications with school district faculty, staff and students. As frontline communicators and ambassadors for the district, Coxsackie-Athens employees should receive important information before it is released to the public or reported in the media whenever possible.

Publications like "Across the Board" serve as the district's means for disseminating this kind of information. In light of its importance, the district should review and refine its contents to ensure that employees remain up-to-date on critical matters, as they happen.

The district should review and establish clear processes for the sharing of information internally with staff. While structures are in place (i.e., shared decision teams, Professional Development Committee), current structures would benefit from direct and explicit reviews of how the products of these meetings (i.e. minutes) are disseminated and then considered for establishing district goals/directions.

The district should support the faculty and staff's role as ambassadors by providing timely information, a clear and consistent message and training when appropriate. This can be done through existing venues such as faculty meetings, email, bulletin boards and mailboxes.

The district should continue to use its Intranet (i.e., internal website for staff) to share internal communications while saving money on printing/paper costs. The district currently uses this system to process field trip requests through Transfinder and share information on athletic events. This system could also expand

information on human resources job postings, purchasing information and handbooks.

Ensure all communications are concise, timely and accurate.

No matter what form of communication the school district utilizes (e.g. newsletters, e-mails, press releases, conversations with community members) communication needs to be concise, timely and accurate.

The district needs to be mindful of focus group perceptions, particularly the sentiment that it needs to be “more transparent with information.” While it is not the public’s right to know everything that happens in a school district (i.e., personnel issues that cannot be discussed), insufficient flow of public information can lead the school community to infer that the district is not being forthcoming or transparent.

Therefore, the district should make its mission to be the “first and best” source of information, both good and bad. The district should assume that its community does not have a lot of time to devote to reading or researching about their schools. The district should also assume that the community receives a lot of information from informal channels that may not have the full story or accurate information.

The sharing of information is particularly critical with important issues where residents want to know about key decisions before they’re made so they can have a voice in the decision-making process. Decisions that will directly impact residents (such as canceling of a sports school bus) must be repeatedly communicated to residents to ensure they are aware.

By being concise in its communications, the district will be more effective in informing its community members. Providing accurate information at all times is absolutely essential to building a district’s credibility with its community. Even honest errors can be perceived negatively by the public and thought to be intentional. If mistakes are made, the district should be honest and transparent about those errors.

Engage the school community in meaningful dialogue.

Focus group participants stated a desire for open, honest, and transparent dialogue with their school district. The district should work to engage stakeholder groups, particular those who may feel alienated by the school system.

While not every decision requires an engagement process (like the one used during the Communications Study), there are times when the district should consider it, such as when it plans new initiatives or addresses a community-wide concern. Residents will get involved if it is an issue or problem that affects them personally.

The engagement process should include strategies for communicating the rationale

behind these efforts as well as provide opportunities for stakeholders to engage in the process (from the very beginning, not just brought in at the approval stage).

The district has taken steps to show its appreciation to the school community with the C-A Star Award initiated during the 2008-09 school year. An informal “open door” or “coffee hour” policy could encourage further community dialogue. Local businesses could be encouraged to sponsor student programs and honor student achievement.

It should be noted that the district is making an effort to engage senior citizens. This includes the Interact Club’s visit to Bethany Village, E.J Arthur students visit to the Senior Center in Athens and the annual grandparents’ day in the spring. Additionally, the elementary schools benefit from a senior citizen doing volunteer work onsite. These are great examples of inter-generational learning that could be expanded to the middle and high school as well.

Focus group members felt that students, teachers and staff could serve as ambassadors of information, both formally and informally. Information booths, staffed by students, could be set up at local events, including well-attended sporting events.

An electronic sign could be posted inside and/or outside of the school to keep the public engaged and informed of events. The district could explore the possibility of grant funding in this regard. Some school districts in the region have applied for and received funding for the purchase of LED signage.

Many members of the community focus groups expressed an interest in finding out how information from this study would be used (including any subsequent plans the district may adopt toward fostering improved communication). In response to this feedback, the district may want to form a “Communications Committee” comprised of key leaders who are willing to assist the district in implementing and evaluating future efforts. These “Key Communicators” could help share timely information with their friends and neighbors on an ongoing basis.

Additionally, the district’s website could provide opportunities for the community to interact and share feedback. Brief web-based surveys are a simple way to solicit direct input from residents at their convenience (rather than require them to attend a public meeting where they may feel uneasy about sharing information on a particular subject).

Expand and improve the school district’s website.

The district website should be a central focus of the district’s ongoing communications efforts and provide timely information to visitors (parents, students, community, faculty and staff). The website can be an effective way of promoting

two-way communications with the school community by providing ways for individuals to offer feedback.

The district's website was not seen by the majority of those interviewed as an important source of news and information, but it has the potential to be an information-sharing tool for the school community. The current website was redesigned about 12 months ago and while it is more student-focused than it was in the past, there is more work that can be done.

Many school districts have transitioned management of their websites from the technology department to an individual with communications skills and perspective. While powered by technology, websites are communications tools that require ongoing, daily maintenance.

The current school webpages and district landing webpage contain static "About Us" information. That is, the information appears to be the same on multiple visits on subsequent days. While this is not always the case, it is a perception that can be addressed by posting ongoing stories about students, achievements and challenges facing Coxsackie-Athens schools. The district should make these inviting webpages where individuals desiring information will turn, not webpages that may be updated monthly or infrequently.

Feedback is a critical component of any communications effort. It is a way to determine what is working and what needs to be changed. The use of the website can help the district gather feedback from the school community.

Many school districts have created a "Feedback" function for residents to ask questions or offer comments through email. Right now, residents can provide feedback to the Board of Education but the school district should give also thought to creating a web page whereby residents can ask questions and the answers to commonly asked questions are posted for the entire community to read.

This feature has proved useful in other school districts to address rumors and answer common questions numerous individuals may have. Examples of these webpages include Schodack's *Have You Heard?*, Averill Park's *Answers Please*, Shenendehowa's *Heard It Through the Grapevine* and Hoosic Valley's *Rumor Mill*.

The district should make the website a resource for parents and community members, including posting commonly requested forms as PDF's or other convenient information. The district should also continue to post newsletters and other publications (such as the 2009 bond referendum) on its website.

Ultimately, the website should be part of the district's mission to be the first and best source of information. Stories should be posted that describe any challenges facing the school district as well as "good news" stories.

Explore the use of new technologies and communications.

Feedback from focus groups indicated differences with preferred communications. Therefore, the district should look at its use of newer technologies or communications vehicles versus existing “old school” communications such as face-to-face meetings or newsletters.

Some groups discussed these demographic changes (i.e., parents and guardians who prefer electronic communications). This shift would make the school district’s website a critical component of its communications efforts.

The district is already using several programs that have expanded communications with parents and guardians. Last year, the district implemented the Synvoice system to provide notification of school closings and delays. This year, the district expanded its use to include evacuation drills, concerts, H1N1 immunization clinics and information on the bond referendum. The school district has also used EdLine for the posting of grades, homework and projects since 2005.

The district should consider an “e-news” e-mail notification system as part of a broader communications strategy. E-news would allow building-level administrators to send direct and timely communications to residents who have signed up for this kind of information. An opt-in notification system harbors the district from issues with unlawful and unwanted email spam. This would also allow the district to push out information to the larger school community (and address the perception that communication efforts are only targeted toward parents).

The latest statistics from Facebook show that more than two-thirds of its users are out of college and the fastest growing demographic is those 35 and older. For school districts, this means access to an audience who wants to connect and wants to have a conversation.

Whether or not Coxsackie-Athens officially jumps into the world of social networking, it should know that residents are participating and establishing virtual communities. They are having conversations online about their children and neighborhoods and sharing their opinions about their schools. The district, at the very least, should be aware of these communications.

Some school districts now use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. to disseminate important information, but a majority of districts have yet to adopt social networking policies, procedures or guidelines to structure these kinds of communications.

Provide communications training to the administrative team.

School leaders in Coxsackie-Athens set a tone for communications across the district. The leadership team, regardless of its communications savvy, could benefit

from training on effective media relations and other communications related topics including: effective presentations, facilitation skills, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” or customer service.

An individual observing and coaching administrators on communications could assist the administration to help prioritize their efforts and hone timely responses. Additionally, this would help ensure that all leaders speak “the same language” and share clear and concise information.

The district could also provide structured opportunities for Central Administrative Leadership to dialogue with community members on key topics. These forums, open to the public to attend, could address specific topics such as the budget, enrollment trends, educational excellence, or graduation rates. Since many community members may be interested in such topics but unable to attend meetings, the district should provide overviews of the discussions on the school website so residents can follow the discussions even if they’re unable to attend.

Improve the branding of Coxsackie-Athens communications.

Our review of Coxsackie-Athen’s publications revealed a lack of consistent “look” or identity for the district. Consistency of branding is important because it helps the reader identify the material as coming from the district. The use of branding and style builds recognition and identity in an age when residents are continuously bombarded with direct mail and email marketing from a variety of sources.

Branding does not mean that each school or district publication needs to be full-color. It means that the publications should use professional graphic design standards and best practices to improve its appearance. The appropriate and consistent use of logos, colors and fonts will help provide an “official stamp” or consistent look to materials, such as forms, newsletters and calendars.

Based on the communication samples and materials provided, much of the school-level communications occur through newsletters, flyers and other materials that go home to parents and guardians. It is recommended that the district look to coordinate the branding and messaging of these publications. It should also continue to use other channels such as school web pages, which provide a paperless and cost-effective way of sharing timely information.

Create a more welcoming format for Board of Education meetings.

The Board of Education has taken steps to make its meetings more welcoming and visitor-friendly in recent years. Like many school districts, some residents do not appear to understand that the work of the Board of Education during a Board meeting is not a meeting of the public, but that it is a meeting of the Board held in public. This would naturally make them feel unwelcomed.

Some focus group participants indicated a desire to obtain agendas before meetings. In light of this, the district should address concerns that board agendas are not readily accessible when they are in fact available the Thursday prior to Tuesday meeting of the following week.

Board agendas indicate when the public is allowed to comment. While the public comment period by design should not be an extensive give-and-take between speakers and the Board, it is important that residents in attendance “feel heard.” Several focus group participants mentioned speaking at Board meetings but getting either no response or a defensive response from the Board.

For controversial topics, the Board could provide opportunities for input in advance of the Board meeting. This can be done through forums (with structured ground rules for participation) or a Question and Answer column (as part of the website).

Since the Board Clerk already prepares a Summary of Board Actions (“Across the Board”), the district may want to explore the refinement of this document and its distribution (i.e., posting it on the website for public review as well). The Board should also make sure that the physical layout and acoustical considerations allow the audience to see and hear all Board of Education members. Some focus group participants expressed a concern with the set-up of these meetings at the middle school.

In light of this concern, the Board should consider changing its venue from the Middle School to Coxsackie Elementary School. Additionally, a representative from the Board of Education may want to attend meetings of other community organizations to share information about school initiatives and answer questions that may exist.

Additionally, a brief, simple brochure describing the role of the Board of Education and the format of meetings may help visitors better understand meeting procedures.

Cultivate relationships with the local news media to facilitate consistent coverage of the district and school news and events.

Another common theme was that the community wanted to see more news about the district and its schools in the local media. While the media outlets ultimately decide what to cover, the school district can take steps to encourage coverage.

As a best practice, one person should be designated as the initial contact for all media inquiries. While the superintendent of schools should remain as the official spokesperson for all district matters, this initial contact could be positioned to be the “go-to” point person for reporters and editors. As noted in a previous section, many school districts have a communications professional that handles media inquiries as part of its duties.

In the absence of a communications position, Coxsackie-Athens CSD should continue to provide news releases to the media about significant decisions, events and achievement (such as its release on the bond referendum and public information session). This information should be provided to the media whether or not reporters are present at an event. News releases guarantee that accurate information is being presented. Ultimately, the district should be the first and best source of information on all school matters.

It should be noted that the past several years have seen fundamental changes in the newspaper industry. A number of newspapers that focused exclusively on community news, such as The Independent in Columbia County, have folded due to declining revenue. Despite these changes, local newspapers still have an audience and the district should continue to look to them as a means of communicating with its public.