

Lake Washington School District: School/Home Communications Task Force Meeting #2 Summary



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Thursday, January 14, 2016

4:00 – 6:00 p.m.

L.E. Scarr Resource Center, Redmond, WA

Task Force Members in Attendance

Kremiere Boone, High School Parent
Lucy Davies, Elementary Principal
Monica Garcia, Elementary Principal
Arianna Haindfield, High School Teacher
Ramu Iyer, Middle School Parent
J-Marie Johnson-Kola, Elementary Parent
Melody Kieffer, High School Office Staff
JD Klein, Middle School Parent
Barbara Martin, High School Parent

Jennifer O'Neal, Elementary Teacher
Stephanie Parry, Elementary Parent
Gale Paul, Middle School Teacher
Victor Scarpelli, Middle School Principal

Members absent

Dale Cote, Director of School Support, Juanita Learning Community
Kelly Pease, Director of Intervention Programs, LWSD – Intervention Programs
Janitzia Pizarro, Rose Hill Middle School – Middle School Office Staff
Julie Tribolet, Environmental & Adventure School, Tesla STEM – PTSA Council Rep.
Lorraine VanKomen, Keller Elementary – Elementary Office Staff

Meeting Purpose and Overview

The Lake Washington School District School/Home Communications Task Force held their second meeting on Thursday, December 10. Topics on the meeting agenda included:

- Introductions
- Review of December meeting discussions
- Review and discussion of NSPRA Audit materials
- Review and discussion of Hanover Research
- School survey data

Meeting Summary

Introductions

Kathryn Reith, the LWSD director of communications and the chair of the School/Home Communications Task Force led the group through introductions. She then outlined the agenda: review of December meeting discussions, review and discussion of NSPRA Audit materials, review and discussion of Hanover Research and school survey data.

Review of December meeting discussions

Kathryn started the agenda by reviewing the December meeting notes. She reminded the task force of their purpose and the ground rules for their discussions. She asked each member of the task force to review the meeting notes and ensure their accuracy. These notes will be added to the School/Home Communications Task Force section of the district website. There is also an option on that website for community members to follow the work of the group. Individuals can sign up for email updates each time that the website is updated.

In response to questions about the Peachjar eflyer system from the previous meeting, Shannon Parthemer gave the task force an update on the use of the Peachjar eflyer system. Organizations that are using the system have email open rates ranging from an average of 53.1%-71.9%. Only 368 families have opted-out of the Peachjar system.

Review and discussion of NSPRA Audit materials

During the 2014-15 school year, LWSD invited the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) to perform an audit of the district's communications efforts. They held a series of focus groups with both internal and external audiences and have provided the district with recommendations for improvement, including specific action steps they felt should be taken.

Kathryn handed out three pages of this audit to the task force, around the action step, "Maximize the value of school newsletters and websites to deliver key messages and important district-level news." Kathryn asked each person to read the handout and then to share with their table group what they felt was important from NSPRA's recommendations. Each table group then shared their comments with the full group. Here are the key pieces that were shared:

- It does not seem like there is a "handshake" happening now between the district and the schools when it comes to newsletters. We need to investigate why.
 - The district should be responsible for templates, tools, set-up and training, technical support, reporting about issues with tools.
 - The district communications office should provide training on how to communicate and provide broadly-available content for school newsletters.
 - Principals should be responsible for school-specific content and execution or newsletters.
- Newsletters need to be personal.
- Across the district, principals need to have a standardized template for newsletters that they can personalize and format for their schools.
 - These templates make look different at the different levels (i.e., elementary, middle school, high school).
- Frequency of newsletters needs to be reviewed. More frequent communications are requested at the elementary level, but how often do secondary parents want newsletters?
- The newsletter is like a newspaper. You should give little bits of information with links to longer articles for those who need more information.
- District articles should be pre-embedded in the newsletter templates provided by the district each month.

- This group needs to look at equitability – all parents should get the same amount/types of information from their schools.
- Newsletters need to focus on how parents can help their children learn.
- Links to videos of teachers talking about how their lesson plans relate to the Common Core would humanize the content and make it more personal.
- Conversations need to happen between the school and the PTA about what information each group should focus on.
 - What is the school role in communication?
 - What is the PTA role in communication?
- Some discussion is needed around the scope of the information being shared.
 - Some parents may want information about what is happening with the Department of Education, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), etc. level, not just LWSD or their school.

Review and discussion of Hanover Research

Kathryn then handed out the “Best Practices in Family and Community Engagement” article from Hanover Research dated March 2014. She asked each task force member to review the “Communicating” column on page 22 of the appendix. Task force members were then asked to share with their table groups what specific information should be included in a school newsletter. Each table group then shared with the larger group.

What specific information should the school include in its newsletter?

- There are some types of information that should be in every edition of the newsletter:
 - How to reach the principal, counselor, etc.
 - Important telephone numbers
 - Important email addresses
 - Link to the contact us page of the school website
 - Homework hotline number(?)
 - How to reach translators
 - Calendar items
- Newsletters should help a parent anticipate what is coming next – report cards, testing, conferences, etc.
- This group should look at what is appropriate and how to curate that content.
- School-specific information: examples of student work, school event photos, column to address parent questions.
- Need to remember the value of face-to-face contact and personalized phone calls for families.
- Are there specific sections of the newsletter that should be translated? If so, what languages?
 - Kathryn shared that there are currently 113 languages spoken in our schools. For most district forms, we translate them into Spanish. This year, we are adding Russian and Hindi.
- Types of content to be translated: What is a conference? What do you need to know?
- Think about how to replicate the warm/welcoming school climate through the school newsletter.
 - Make the newsletter warm and human, not technical.

- Think about how to make the newsletter more personal – maybe add photos of staff members who generate the content.

School survey data and newsletters

Following the last meeting of the task force, Kathryn sent out a survey to all school principals. The survey focused on school newsletters. As of the date of the task force meeting, 34 of the 52 schools had responded to this survey. The questions included:

- What level is your school?
- Do you publish a school newsletter that is separate from the PTSA newsletter, or do you combine the two publications?
- How often do you publish the school newsletter or combined school/PTSA newsletter?
- Who writes articles for your school newsletter/combined newsletter?
- Who primarily compiles and edits your school newsletter/combined newsletter?
- How do you publish your newsletter?
- What kind of information do you include in your newsletter?

After reviewing the survey data, the task force discussed the results and made further suggestions and comments:

- If schools are producing a monthly newsletter only, what other communications are they producing to fill the gaps?
- Is compiling and editing newsletters how we want principals spending their time? They should write/contribute, but they shouldn't be spending time tracking down articles.
- Are there specific concerns that the district is trying to address about contact that is not being included in newsletters?
- Parents are concerned that they are not getting messages if they don't hear from the school regularly.
- Many people feel information overload on electronic communications.
- We should provide regularity in messaging, provide a common place where we can find the messages and make sure that we haven't missed items.
- On the item, "Information for parents on how to support their student's education", 85% of the schools said they include this information – this group needs to help them get that number to 100%.

As a group, the task force wants to look at this data to determine key indicators for both short-term and long-term. What should our metrics look like next year? How will they change?

Kathryn also collected newsletter samples from each of the schools. These will be sent out following this meeting so that each person on the task force has time to review and analyze the school newsletters.

For the next meeting:

Kathryn will send out another survey to principals, this time focusing on the tools that are used to send information out. She also will add questions to the program survey for parents and administrators around newsletter communications such as: topics and frequency of communication; are the communications useful, effective; what would drive you to open the newsletter.

Kathryn and Shannon will also meet with the Communications Advisory group on February 5. That group is made up of PTSA Communications VPs and others who are interested in school communications. She will get feedback from that group around the following:

- How effective are the current school newsletters?
- Get more information about what type of information schools include that answers the question about how parents can support their children's education.
- Do parents feel connected to the teachers and staff?
- What does family engagement feel like? How do newsletters play a role in that?
- What methods are PTSAs/schools using to connect with families who do not get the electronic newsletter?
- How do we ensure that we are reaching all parents?

Each task force member was asked to review the newsletters that will be sent out via email as a PDF prior to the next meeting on February 18.