Communications Position

There is a significant gap between Scarsdale's traditional public information function and modern demands. Essentially, the existing program was designed to produce print information and facilitate public contact with the schools, assuming that the results would satisfy the public's need to know. In addition, it provided information internally, to faculty and staff.

In the last decade, however, technology and social change have combined to challenge this traditional view of the function. The widespread use of social media, the appearance of community blogs, the urgency of e-mail communication and the 24 hour news cycle have all raised the level of public expectation for immediate, personal response to constituent perceptions and wants.

Rising expectations and nation-wide criticism of public education, combined with widespread skepticism about all institutions during a period of financial stringency, have created unprecedented demand for interaction and transparency. While the increased "need to know" is most apparent at moments of extreme stress – in the blackout following this past fall's hurricane, for instance – it is also more generally apparent in everyday interactions between institutions and their publics.

To be heard and to be credible amidst the static, confusion, and disillusionment of the 2000's, organizations must arrive at a deep understanding of their constituents' values, perceptions and wants. They also must provide well-developed, timely information through robust, focused communications plans. Going forward, furthermore, this communication process will depend even more heavily on technology. Scarsdale has been trying to carry out all these activities with an undersized communications structure designed in the last century.

The Board of Education has identified two areas in which the current structure fails to meet these objectives: strategic planning and program development and electronic interface with the community. These needs will be addressed by realigning the current public information position's responsibilities and adding time from the proposed communications position.

The existing Public Information Position is responsible for:

- Producing several newsletters and several half hour video programs each year.
- Producing website content
- Identifying story sources, researching material , writing and editing copy.
- Visiting the schools and taking photographs for publication
- Maintaining relations with local, regional and national media
- Suggesting leads and arranging story placement in the media
- Trouble-shooting and responding to reporters' requests
- Tracking and where appropriate initiating contacts with or responding to social media
- Collaborating in planning and developing video/media reports for Board of Education meetings
- Arranging meetings and visits for local groups (Class of '52, e.g.), delegations, dignitaries
- Responding or prompting administrative responses to correspondence/media coverage

- Researching, writing, producing other materials for public use(brochures, pamphlets, mailings, Q&A's, e.g.)
- Researching, writing and producing in-house information (orientation materials, newsletters, curriculum guides, e.g.)

By realigning these responsibilities and adding the proposed Communications Position, the District will be able to address the following areas of concern.

Strategic Planning and Program Development*

- Research public awareness of/interest in schools and school issues
- Provide Board and Superintendent information to assist in developing District priorities
- Develop plans to address resident awareness/interests and to communicate District priorities
- Identify key public information issues and themes consistent with District priorities
- Develop plans to manage communications in unusual circumstances (storms, accidents, eg.)
- Develop public information plans to address special projects (capital construction, e.g.)
- Prepare case statements and funding proposals for Scarsdale Education Foundation and private foundations
- Proactively initiate improvements in the public information function

Publications/School Media/Social Media**

- Serve as Webmaster, responsible for website planning, design, management and updating
- Track social media and local blogs and identify emerging opinions, concerns, themes, trends
- Use this information to enable administrators/Board to consider emerging ideas in decision-making
- Develop social media outlets: podcast/video/Youtube planning, design and management

Strategic Thinking: The District's strategic thinking about public information for the most part involves efforts to identify themes or issues that seem to merit more consistent attention in publications, on the website and at Board meetings. The link between themes/issues and what actually gets published or posted is inconsistent. Given the scope of existing public information work and staff time available, relatively little attention can be devoted to a more developed process of strategic planning and implementation.

Although the District has occasionally hosted community feedback sessions and has commissioned focus groups, staff is not trained to do this kind of work. Neither have the schools really explored the potential of social media for gathering information about public perceptions or for communicating with the public. For the most part, "strategic" outreach is informal, depending largely on personal encounters and what's "heard around."

**Website*: The website should be the primary source of information about the District, schools and programs, a dynamic, interactive and consistently updated presence with links to resources both within the school community and beyond.

The site should respond to user needs and interests, featuring breaking stories, interesting feature pieces and background information concerning the rich array of activities in all of our schools. In practice, it has been difficult just to keep pace with a relative handful of information items and posting some extended pieces that grow out of Board presentations and similar events.   Also, site design and content should be integrated and each should reinforce the other – graphic design should shape the character of content and vice versa. Currently, these elements of the site are developed separately.

Over the past four years, the District has realigned existing staff in several different ways in order to carry out the traditional functions of the Public Information Office and also produce a robust, updated site of this nature. Despite best efforts, the site is still static, dated, and marginally interactive. Different but related elements are still uncoordinated.   In addition, content production, visual design and technical implementation have been separate instead of integrated activities.

Social Media: The District currently makes relatively little use of social media – either for gathering or for sharing information.   This resource is increasingly important in the lives of community members, and the District runs a significant communications risk if it fails to adapt to that reality and to capitalize on the opportunities it offers.   The omnipresence of e-mail and its relatives, twitter and so on, has created widespread expectations that extensive information will be available to residents on a more personalized basis.   The proliferation of electronic information – more and less accurate – can also require responses that the District is currently unable to provide.

Print Communication: The newsletter and other printed materials are less timely and less prominent in an electronic environment. Nonetheless, we anticipate that print will remain an important part of our communications plan for the foreseeable future. The format has the virtue of physical presence in people's homes. At this point, furthermore, community members feel varying degrees of comfort with on-line resources, while over half of households have no access to school e-mails.