Abstract

This Communications Plan will guide the manner, style and range of communication within the Greater Essex County District School Board (hereafter referred to as GECDSB) and with our external audiences.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The GECDSB aims to enjoy the benefits of positive, two-way communication with all the individuals and organizations that have interests in Public Education.

The GECDSB is one of the largest corporations in Windsor and Essex County employing approximately four thousand seven hundred individuals with responsibility for nearly thirty-three thousand students. We operate seventy-six schools (60 elementary – 16 secondary), an adult education program and four agency schools throughout eight communities and manage an annual budget of between three hundred and four hundred million dollars.

Student achievement in a safe, open, challenging, caring and stimulating environment is our primary goal. However, as a public institution we bear the responsibility of being open and accessible to all citizens of Windsor and Essex County. Communication among all parties supports the Board’s mission.

Effective and open internal communications creates a climate of trust and understanding among students, parents and guardians, staff and administration. Focused and creative external communications will enhance opportunities for everyone in the GECDSB by helping to maximize community involvement and enrolment.

It is incumbent upon the GECDSB to establish and maintain a thoughtful and in-depth plan to engender consistent communications. This document outlines goals, vehicles and procedures for communication by the Board with its internal and external audiences.
1.0 **System Overview**

*The GECDSB recognizes the importance of effective, open, two-way communication*

It is a priority of the GECDSB to engage parents, caregivers, families, students, staff and all groups and individuals with an interest in public education as active partners. Children learn more successfully when there is strong community support and belief in the schools’ ability to achieve excellence. We must, therefore, be willing and able to share the goals and successes of the Board with many audiences.

As a public organization, the GECDSB is responsible for informing taxpayers that it is efficiently using its allocated resources. This obligates us to maintain an open dialogue with all members of the community and provide transparency to the conduct of our operation.

1.1 **Our Organization** *

*How well people communicate relates directly to the level of understanding between the parties*

* All groups and individuals in the GECDSB are committed to: high levels of student achievement, reducing gaps in student achievement and high levels of public confidence in public education.

♦ **Trustees**: the 10 elected members of the Board and 2 Student Trustees*
  - develop local policies and approve budget
  - Trustees are expected to act in the broad public interest while simultaneously representing identifiable constituencies.
  - among the most recognizable people in our organization
  - inform the general public of the Board’s intent

* Student Trustees are selected by a committee from applications received from secondary students, have non-binding vote at Board and Standing Committee meetings and chair the Student Senate.

♦ **Senior Administration**: the Director of Education and Superintendents
  - provide information as well as educational and administrative expertise to the Board of Trustees
  - report to the Board of Trustees on the implementation of the Board’s goals
  - responsible for the management of the budget and implementation of Board policies
  - often public spokespersons for the Board

♦ **Managers**: departmental leaders
  - responsible for staff supervision and operations in individual departments
  - report directly to Superintendents
♦ **Principals:** the chief administrators at individual schools

- oversee the operations of the facility and the conduct of staff and students
- liaison between senior administration and the school community
- primary communicators of system information to their school communities

♦ **Teaching Staff:** teachers

- deliver curriculum and services to students
- responsible for communicating student achievement to parents
- vital source of information regarding school activities and successes

♦ **Support Staff:** educational assistants, administrative assistants, secretaries, Professional Student Services Personnel (social workers, speech therapists, psychologists and attendance counselors), maintenance and engineering personnel

- support teaching staff
- vital source of information regarding school activities and successes

♦ **Parents:** guardians of individual student and family interests

- keep all levels of administration accountable for student achievement and safety
- influential supporters and promoters of the system

♦ **Students:** junior kindergarten through secondary and adult education clients

- consumers of Board programs and services
- under permissible circumstances, a primary source of information and correspondence with the community regarding Board activities.

1.2 **Our Audiences**

*The GECDSB believes that honest, interactive communication builds trust and commitment*

The target audiences can be separated into 2 categories: internal and external (though there will be some overlap between the 2). The internal audiences include trustees, staff, union representatives, students and their families. Our external audiences are essentially everyone in the communities served by the GECDSB as well as the media and municipal, provincial and federal governments.

- Parents/families/caregivers (elementary, secondary, special needs, and preschool)

  Communication needs:
  - pertinent student data / information
  - good news
  - school and Board operational information
- understanding of curriculum
- opportunities for input / feedback

o School Councils / GEC Parental Involvement Committee

Communication needs:
- good news
- information on Board events and activities
- opportunities for input / feedback

o Students

Communication needs:
- expectations (re. academics, code of conduct…)
- good news
- relevant school operational information
- opportunities for input / feedback

o Staff (teachers, administration, custodial/engineering, clerical, professional)

Communication needs:
- Board and administrative directions
- Board policies and strategic plan
- opportunities for input / feedback
- good news

o Union representatives (Local association presidents)

Communication needs:
- information on Board events / activities
- opportunities for input / feedback
- Board policies and strategic plan
- good news
- relevant Board operational information

o Trustees

Communication needs:
- information / insight on issues to allow for informed decision making
- good news to promote the system in the community
- information on Board events

o Communities

Communication needs:
- relevant Board and school operational information
- good news
- opportunities for input / feedback
Strategic Communication Plan

- Governments (municipal, provincial, federal)

  Communication needs:
  - good news
  - relevant Board operational data and information
  - information on Board events / activities

- Media

  Communication needs:
  - information on Board events, activities and operations
  - good news
  - timely response to inquiries / requests

1.3 **Key Messages**

**Statements that can be authenticated through research and data**

*The 3 Es of the GECDSB*

⇒ The GECDSB strives for **excellence** in all undertakings.

⇒ The GECDSB provides **effective** programs and opportunities delivered and supported by a professional and conscientious staff so all students can learn and achieve their full potential.

⇒ The GECDSB is fiscally responsible and pledges **efficient** use of its resources.

1.4 **Communication Vehicles**

*The means of delivering your message to the appropriate audience*

The GECDSB has a wide variety of means and methods to facilitate communication with our target audiences. The following list provides examples of some vehicles currently or previously used by the Board (in no particular order):

- Public board meetings
- Director’s Memo
- Superintendents
- School office staff
- The Element (Board Newsletter)
- Continuous Growth Plan
- Teachers
- Promotional materials
- School Improvement Plans
- Extra-curricular activities
- Board media centre
- Advertising
- Accommodation report
- Board website
- Use of GECDSB facilities
- School newsletters
- Key Communicators Network
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Chapter 2: Objectives

The GECDSB, in partnership with the community, provides learning opportunities which support, challenge and inspire all students to achieve their full potential and enable them to participate meaningfully in their communities.

2.0 This Communication Plan will:

- Assist in improving student achievement through increased involvement and support from parents/guardians and other important GECDSB partners.

- Be proactive in portraying the GECDSB in a positive fashion in our communities.

- Increase public confidence in public education.

- Provide timely response on issues.

- Build and maintain strong links, based on trust, among administration, staff, trustees, school councils, students, parents and the community.

- Ensure that school administration and staff have mechanisms in place to communicate with the entire GECDSB community.

- Increase student and staff pride through recognition of achievements and rewarding excellence.

- Share good news about public education by offering a window into our classrooms.

- Keep all audiences informed of Board and administrative directions.

- Generate awareness of the Board’s priorities, programs, achievements and spending.

- Establish and maintain positive media relations.

- Maximize enrolment.

- Meet all requirements under provincial legislation including the Education Act and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.
2.1 **Communication Tools**

(a) **The Brand**

A brand includes a name, logo, slogan(s) and key messages supported by a strategy to promote a product or service.

Brand recognition and loyalty as well as other positive consumer responses are created by the use of a product or service and through the influence of advertising, design, media commentary and marketing strategy.

A Brand is the symbolic embodiment of all the information and perceptions connected to our organization and goals and attempts to create intended associations and expectations.

(b) **Logo**

![Logo Image]

This logo was unanimously accepted by the Board of Trustees on May 26, 1998. The two central figures are symbolic of working together towards a common goal. The star, within reach of the figures, represents attainable goals and striving for excellence.

In order to promote our brand properly, use of the logo must be consistent. It should only be used in accordance with the Board’s approved policy and Style Guide.

(c) **Slogans**

![Slogan Image]

The “We have BIG plans for your little one!” slogan and corresponding images is a recognizable part of our brand. It is used in the promotion of kindergarten registration but is also a primary icon for the Board in general.
“We have BIG plans for a GREAT future!” is the complementary version for use in secondary school promotions and communications.

(d) Public Relations Officer

The Public Relations Officer (hereafter referred to as the P.R.O.) is a member of the Director of Education’s office located at the administration building (451 Park St. Windsor).

The P.R.O. is responsible for the Board’s mandate from the Ministry of Education to “create high levels of public confidence in public education”. The P.R.O is available to staff to provide advice on effective methods and forms of communication to reach their desired audience(s).

(e) Key Communicators

A Key Communicator (hereafter referred to as K.C.) is a staff member at each school, appointed by the Principal, who facilitates the exchange of information and ideas within the school community, among schools, with the Board, and throughout the communities we serve.
The K.C. is responsible for creating School News Releases, which promote activities and achievements at their school. The K.C. also acts as a public relations and communications resource in the school. A Key Communicators Handbook has been produced to define, in detail, the roles and responsibilities of this valuable communications function.

(f) Board website (www.publicboard.ca)

The GECDSB has identified the internet as an essential vehicle for communication with all its audiences. We maintain a comprehensive website - www.publicboard.ca - through which we provide information on the Board, schools, programs, departments and activities.

Day to day maintenance of the website is the responsibility of the Webmaster (website administrator) who chairs a committee of representatives from various departments. Oversight of website content is managed by members of senior administration, who have been delegated responsibility for designated areas of the site. (see Appendix C)

2.2 Operational Communication Plans

It is recommended that each school produce its own annual operational communication plan and there should be a communication plan developed for every public Board activity and event. An operational communication plan lists key messages, audiences and vehicles for connecting the messages to their desired audience. The plan should also outline the objectives and include a detailed action plan which sets timelines and delegates responsibilities.
Chapter 3: Programming

3.0 Event Management

All events, whether intended for internal or external audiences should be planned and executed in keeping with all GECDSB codes of conduct and in strict observance of the Education Act and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Acts. Consideration should be given to maintaining consistency with approved messages and themes suggested by the Board.

Board-wide public relations or media events will be coordinated through the Director of Education’s office with input from the Public Relations Officer and the appropriate members of senior administration. When a Board-wide event is staged at or with the cooperation of an individual school, the Principal will be consulted.

Individual schools producing or managing events may request and expect assistance in promotions or public relations from the P.R.O. and/or the Director’s office.

3.1 Protocol for Working with Trustees

Introduction

Protocol is the combination of courtesy and common sense. The following guidelines ensure the use of proper etiquette when Trustees interact with school communities and that due respect is accorded these elected officials.

Roles and Responsibilities

Trustees are elected to 4 year terms. Each year the 10 member Board selects a chairperson and vice-chair to preside over meetings and act as spokespersons for the Board.

The Board of Trustees establishes policies that govern the provision of education in its school district. The Board hires the Director of Education and is responsible for his/her performance management.

Individual Trustees have no independent decision-making authority, however while they are expected to act in the broad public interest with loyalty to the Board, they must represent the interests of their particular constituency.

Keeping Trustees Informed

Trustees are high profile ambassadors for our Board; therefore, it is important that they are kept informed of events, activities and successes at the schools in the areas they represent. Include your area Trustee(s) on mailing lists for newsletters, school newspapers and bulletins.
For Events Organized by Schools

School administrators or event organizers may contact their Trustee(s) directly with invitations to attend occasions, functions or celebrations at the school.

Invitations may be made via e-mail, phone or traditional mail. Contact information is available on the Board website (www.publicboard.ca) or through the office of the Director of Education.

* Always request an RSVP with a reasonable period for the Trustee to respond. If no response to the invitation has been forthcoming, a reminder from the Principal is appropriate, however if there is no immediate response to the reminder, it can be fairly assumed that the Trustee will not be attending.

Trustees should be provided with as many details of the event as possible including: purpose, date, time, location, directions, parking, other invited guests and potential audience. If the Trustee has been asked to bring greetings or make a presentation the event organizer should also be prepared to provide information that assists the Trustee prepare remarks.

* It is acceptable to inform the Trustee of the amount of time allocated to their remarks or presentation.

If the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees is in attendance he/she will always speak on behalf of the Board.

*If the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees has been invited but is unable to attend he/she may delegate the responsibility to another Trustee.

If a public introduction of the Trustee is required, a brief biography is available on the Board’s website. If more information is required please contact the Executive Assistant to the Director of Education or the Public Relations Officer.

Always confirm the correct spelling and pronunciation of the Trustee’s name.

Proper Titles

Chairperson of the Board of Trustees
Vice-chairperson of the Board of Trustees
Trustee for (Ward or Region)

It is always a sound practice to inform the Trustee if he/she is not going to be a featured speaker during the event.

Even if the invited Trustee is not scheduled to speak, he/she should be suitably recognized as in attendance.

Seating for Trustees should be reserved in an appropriate area.
As a general rule, if a Trustee has been asked to speak, he/she should have precedence in the program.

*An exception is when the area Member of Provincial Parliament or other high-ranking, elected Provincial government official is also among the scheduled speakers.

3.2 Labour Relations

All communications regarding labour relations or related issues will be conducted through the office of the Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Director of Education and the Superintendent of Human Resources.

The GECDSB respects and acknowledges the value of all staff. It is our goal to have open and honest dialogue with employees and the collective bargaining organizations which represent them. We welcome their input and inquiries.

It is essential that all staff appreciate that they are partners with the Board in the promotion and growth of public education. Every employee is a communicator and an important contributor to the reputation and the public impression developed of the GECDSB.

3.2 Internal Communication

During the consideration of Board announcements or the development of programs, thought must be given to the timing and means for informing all our internal audiences. Before or in concert with the release of information publicly, every effort should be made to ensure that our internal audiences are made aware of what is happening.

3.3 Communicating in a Crisis Situation

Certain situations have been identified in the GECDSB Emergency Response Management Program (hereafter referred to as E.R.M.P) - updated Aug. 1, 2004 - requiring the utilization of crisis situation procedures. This may include any incident that threatens the well-being of students, staff or volunteers in a school or work site, whether it is an accidental injury, fire, violent episode, or other situation deemed to be an emergency or crisis.

Communication under these circumstances must be accurate, yet expeditious and flow through the proper channels. Guidelines laid out in the E.R.M.P. should be followed.

The Director of Education or an appointed delegate is the only person who will communicate directly with the media during a crisis situation. The Executive Assistant to the Director will coordinate all media releases and interview opportunities. During situations when the media arrives at the site, staff and students still in the area should be encouraged to refer all media inquiries to the Director’s Office. Principals should consult the guidelines in the E.R.M.P. The primary concern is the safety of students and staff.
Incorrect information disseminated through the media can exacerbate an already difficult situation and possibly cause pain or embarrassment to members of the community. It may also hinder the efforts of emergency personnel attempting to bring a resolution to the crisis.

A secondary concern in crisis situations is for the reputation of the Board and the confidence students, parents and the community at large has about the learning environment in our schools. We will often be evaluated by the quality of our response in these difficult circumstances. This is especially important in dealing with the follow-up to a crisis, when questions, such as: “Why did this happen?” will be asked and require complete and thoughtful answers.

3.4 School Closings

The closure of a school has the potential to be a positive, reflective, bond-strengthening event. Experience has shown, though, that it can be a mechanism for dissent, mistrust and division if messages are not properly communicated.

During any consideration of a school closing by Board administration an operational communications plan should be produced. This will allow for the preparation of proper reactions and responses to all affected/interested parties, with appropriate messages. Consideration should always be given to the creation of messages and public relations events that promote the positive aspects of the decision to close and the anticipated future benefits.
**Chapter 4: Media Relations**

A large percentage of our external audience receives most of its information about the GECDSB and public education through the mass media. Radio, television, newspapers and print periodicals are the vehicles through which they can be reached. The internet is another tool with which to connect with our external audience, however, at this time, independent, web-based media are not yet a factor in our community.

**4.0 Media Protocol**

The GECDSB will always respond to media requests for information or access in a timely manner, understanding the needs and deadlines of each outlet. Whatever is necessary, within reason, will be done to facilitate their requests.

For most* media requests, the protocol is to go through the office of the Director of Education. The Director may choose to delegate responsibility for handling the request for information, an interview, or access to one of our facilities to a Superintendent or school Principal.

* Principals (or their delegates) are encouraged to develop and maintain a direct relationship with their local, community oriented media (e.g. weekly newspapers).

As a public organization, it is our responsibility to respond. It is also in our best interests. Every opportunity to highlight positive events and achievements in our Board helps us fulfill our organizational goals. However, through no fault of our own, stories sometimes may reflect negatively on the Board. We are still obliged, and should be eager to respond, regardless the tenor of the inquiry, because it is an opportunity to present our version of the story.

**4.1 The Media**

In most cases, the media will initiate contact for one of three reasons:

1. Our organization is the focus or a principal player in a story.
2. A reporter requires an objective or divergent point of view to balance or help focus a general news item.
3. News organizations and reporters sometimes require information or insight that will not necessarily attributed to the Board.
4.2 Answering Questions

The GECDSB will always, to the best of our ability, accommodate media inquiries and requests!

There are only 3 ways to respond to a question from the media:

   a) “Here is an honest answer!”
   b) “I’m sorry, but I don’t have that information. I will research or investigate and get back to you.”
   c) “Because of (legitimate circumstances) I am not able to answer that at this time.”

When responding to a direct media inquiry, honesty is the ONLY policy.

4.3 Being Proactive

There will often be opportunities for the Board to assume a proactive position in our relationship with the media. An event, accomplishment, or program will be considered noteworthy or newsworthy and a media release will be distributed. This will contain information regarding a news conference, a story opportunity, or an announcement with a list of contacts should the media wish to follow up.

The Key Communicators Network has been established to provide a mechanism to share good news with the community through the media. School News Releases are created by the Key Communicators and on approval of the Principal, are forwarded to the Public Relations office for distribution.

4.4 Issues Response

Often the Board will be required to respond to unexpected issues or events that might affect our staff, students, or organization. These media inquiries should be handled in as efficient a manner as possible, though, consideration must be given to ensuring an honest, thoughtful, accurate response.

Any request for a response to or information on an issue or event should first be cleared through the office of the Director of Education. The proper method for any Board employee dealing with the media should be to get the reporter’s name, news organization, phone number and deadline as well as a clear idea of the matter requiring a response. The Director will then be able to determine who is best suited to represent the Board regarding this issue/event and to make certain that the information being disseminated by the Board is accurate. This also ensures the privacy of individuals under the Education Act and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

There may be instances in which a member of the Board has developed a reputation or relationship with members of the media, and they may be called upon directly to respond to a matter relevant to their position or expertise. It is not necessary to seek consent in these matters; however it is important to inform the Director’s office that the communication took place, what was required, etc.
If the inquiry regards an issue on which the Board has not previously recorded a statement or developed a policy, it is essential that the Director of Education or Chairperson of the Board of Trustees are the only members of the organization who should respond.

4.5 Understanding the Media

It is the responsibility of the Board to understand the operations and needs of each media outlet. For example, while a radio reporter and television reporter may eventually both tell the same story, one usually requires a great deal more time and effort than the other.

Deadlines also vary dramatically from one medium or organization to another. As well, it is essential to be aware of the management structures of each medium as well as how stories and coverage are generated.

Media outlets deal with hundreds of different organizations on a regular basis; therefore it is incumbent upon the Board to ensure they are well informed of our structure and practices.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The GECDSB is generally viewed by our audiences as open and accessible and fulfilling its mission to: “in partnership with the community, provide learning opportunities which support, challenge and inspire all students to achieve their full potential and enable them to participate meaningfully in their communities”.

Our current communications strategies have assisted in that fundamental goal. However, we must continue to strive for excellence in communication with our students and staff as well as all members of the community and our partners. Effective communication will reinforce the foundation of our long term success.

No one, though, can predict the future. Objectives and purposes often change and alternative messages and methods of delivery must be considered. This plan, therefore, must continuously adapt and change. Initiatives and programs should be reviewed annually and a list of strategies created for the school year.