

## **2023 GOLDEN ACHIEVEMENT ENTRY**

# **Community Engagement to Create the First Strategic Communication Plan in a School District's 64-year History**



### **ENTRANT**

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Carla Erdey, APR

Director of Communications & Community Engagement

### **DISTRICT**

Suburban public high school  
3,000 students





## SUMMARY

In 2022-23, the Homewood-Flossmoor High School administrative team saw several significant changes - a new Superintendent, a new Principal and a new Director of Communications and Community Engagement. For a long time, the school had combined the leadership responsibilities of both Human Resources and Public Relations in one position. One of the first actions taken by the new Superintendent split those responsibilities allowing the existing administrator to lead the human resources function and a new administrator to lead communications and community engagement. This organizational structure set the stage for increased focus on strategic communications and engagement. The Superintendent and new Director of Communications and Community Engagement promised transparent, timely and two-way communication.

With 26 years of school PR experience, Carla Erdey, APR, joined Communications and Website Coordinator Nicole Castagna, a 12-year veteran of the department, and added Matt Holdren, a long-time English and Film teacher as a part-time videographer. Erdey had recently completed studies to earn Accreditation in Public Relations (APR), and this provided the perfect opportunity for her to put what she learned about the R-PIE process into action. Her first request of the Superintendent was to support her in engaging the community to develop and implement the first strategic communication plan in the school district's 64-year history. Utilizing R-PIE, they began with a comprehensive communication audit including a SCoPE survey, focus groups and analysis of existing communications and analytics. A team of administrators, support staff and a teacher embarked on studying the data from the audit to prioritize needs and develop objectives, strategies, tactics and evaluation measures.

**The result is the first strategic communication plan in Homewood-Flossmoor High School's 64-year history.**

## About H-F

Homewood-Flossmoor High School (affectionately referred to as H-F) serves nearly 3,000 students and 350 full-time employees and is located approximately 25 miles south of downtown Chicago. The student body is diverse - 72% Black, 15% White, 8% Hispanic, 4% Multiracial and 1% Asian - an attribute, along with quality education, that parents repeatedly cite for moving into the district. Demographically upscale, the residents are well educated, with more than 95% completing high school, 82.6% having some college, and 62.3% holding college degrees.

## Research

The process began with research to understand what works well and where there is area for improvement in terms of communication and engagement.

## Interviews & Focus Groups - SUMMARY DOCUMENT

Erdey conducted interviews and focus groups with 50 participants including Board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, students and community members without students at H-F.

Six key questions were asked:

- How do you get important news and information about issues affecting students, staff, and the school?
- Are there other communication tools or initiatives you'd like to see?
- With the new leadership team in place, what communication/engagement do you hope for when administrators are making important decisions that will affect you?
- What is the current image of our school district in the community? How would you describe the district/school to someone new to our community?
- What does the district do well when it comes to communicating during a serious incident or crisis?
- Is there anything else you would like us to know?

## SCoPE Survey - SCoPE Report Summary

The school district contracted with SCoPE to conduct a comprehensive communication survey with target audiences of students, staff, families and community members without students at H-F. Response rates from students, staff and families provided statistically reliable data to help guide the planning process. Response rates from community members without students at H-F were lower than hoped indicating a need for stronger communication ties to this audience. H-F was the first school to ever administer SCoPE to students.

## Communications Review - SUMMARY DOCUMENT

Erdey and Castagna gathered all of the regular communications produced in the past few years — as well as analytics regarding eNewsletters, social media and websites — to analyze what was working well and where there was room for improvement.

### Planning

A team of staff members including Director of Communications and Community Engagement, Communications and Website Coordinator, Director of Alumni Relations, Principal, Athletic Director, Activities Director, Guidance Department Chair and a Teacher formed a Communication Planning Team to review all of the data gathered and develop objectives, strategies, tactics, timelines and measures. They met over a course of four months, focusing specifically on the R-PIE process to create the first Strategic Communications Plan in the school's 64-year history ([meeting agendas and notes](#)).

### Implementation

With responsibilities assigned and timelines in place, the team quickly got to work implementing the plan. In the few months since finalizing the plan, the strategies and tactics are on track and progress is being monitored through established metrics.

[You can view the complete plan including tracking of progress here.](#)

[The H-F News Central webpage provides access to communications being produced.](#)

### Evaluation

The ultimate evaluation of the plan's success will come with the implementation of the SCoPE survey in the 2023-24 school year once the strategies and tactics for the two-year plan have sufficient time to take place and make an impact on stakeholder opinions. In the meantime, progress is being monitored through analytics and that tracking can be seen in this [scorecard document](#). And, a mid-year Communications Check-in Survey shows favorable results so far.

Considering ALL communications from Homewood-Flossmoor High School, please give an OVERALL RATING for the following

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