School & Community Relations

BRIEFING REPORT

MARCH 2019

Arlington Public Schools

PARTNERS & VOLUNTEERS
IN ACTION

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The primary focus of the Department of School and Community Relations (SCR) is to enhance communications within Arlington Public Schools (APS), and between schools and the Arlington community. The department's mission is to ensure that students, staff, families and the community are informed about the latest APS news, activities, achievements, and opportunities. SCR works collaboratively with all APS schools and departments to ensure that the community is encouraged to be involved in upcoming initiatives, get engaged in APS governance issues, and provide input on planning.

MAJOR SERVICES PROVIDED

SCR is responsible for managing media relations; community outreach; public information; the school division's website and social media presence; volunteers and partnership programs; Arlington Educational Television (AETV); and Print Services. Specific services include:

- Disseminate information through a variety of platforms to ensure the community is informed and engaged
- Coordinate email, voicemail, and text message communications to disseminate timely news and information to more than 40,000 APS families, staff and community members
- Conduct ongoing community outreach and facilitate face-to-face meetings and events with community influencers and organizational partners
- Foster effective media relations by maintaining strong relationships with local media, conducting proactive media outreach and coordinating responses to media requests
- Manage the central content of the APS website, deliver training and provide oversight for editors and designated "Web Liaisons" for each department and school
- Produce videos through AETV that showcase school instruction, learning activities, and opportunities for students
- Provide school news and information to constituents by planning, promoting, and executing countywide celebrations, recognitions and information sessions

- Manage APS's volunteer and partnership program by recruiting, screening, and placing resources to support schools and instruction
- Engage with the community on APS social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube
- Manage emergency communications about changes in operations due to local, regional, national or weather emergencies

BRIGHT SPOTS

EXPANSION OF COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Since the launch of the *Engage with APS* sub-site in February 2017, SCR has worked closely with Planning and Evaluation to establish *Engage* as the central destination for important information and engagement opportunities on planning initiatives, ranging from boundary adjustments and school naming to the annual budget process, policy review and development of the new Strategic Plan.

Engage provides easy access to information and is promoted on a weekly basis to the APS community through School Talk *Engage* messages, e-newsletters and social media. As a result, *Engage* page views now average 8,600 per month – an increase of more than 200 percent since the initial launch.

In addition, SCR staff led the community engagement process around the naming of four new schools and the renaming of Washington-Lee in Fall 2018. Efforts included organizing naming committees, facilitation, community outreach, *Engage* website updates, surveys and data collection, and final School Board presentations.

SCR also introduced new services to reach a broader and more diverse constituency, including:

- **Bi-Weekly Updates** on community engagement opportunities and events expanded to reach a database of more than 1,000 community and civic leaders.

- **Engage 101 Workshops** were added to strengthen APS connections with non-English speaking parents/guardians by offering hands-on introductions to APS communications tools, such as School Talk, Peachjar and the website translation feature.

- **Expanded Video Capabilities** enabled AETV to capture more stories and topics in varying formats, leading to nearly 50 percent growth in video views since 2017. In addition to shorter, weekly Snapshots videos and ongoing programming, AETV produced multiple in-depth videos about APS instructional programs and services, including Dual Language Immersion, Dyslexia, a Telenovela series on special education, and profiles of schools involved in the boundary process.

- **Livestreaming and Facebook LIVE** more than doubled the reach of Information Nights and other events.

NEW COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVES

SCR has focused on expanding and enhancing existing communications platforms and resources to promote positive stories and make information more accessible and engaging for families and staff. SCR launched several new initiatives to strengthen outreach to internal and external stakeholders. Highlights include:

- **APS School Talk** transitioned to a new platform in 2017-18 to reduce costs, improve communications and visually brand messages by school or topic.

- The *APS Friday 5* **newsletter** launched in September 2018 to replace the bi-weekly APS NewsReview, providing families and staff with engaging weekly news and information. The new format also responds to family and staff feedback on "message overload" by bundling five main messages and positive stories in one weekly roundup.

- *Making a Difference for APS* monthly Volunteer & Partnership newsletter was launched in a new format, now reaching more than 4,000 community members each month to highlight the vital role of partners and volunteers in APS.

- **APS website enhancements**, like video closed captioning, podcast transcripts and webmaster training made content more user-friendly and accessible for all audiences, in response to an Office of Civil Rights request.

- The **"What's Up, APS?"** podcast was launched in 2018 to cover topics of interest for listeners and commuters. More than 20 episodes per year provide listeners an inside perspective on a wide range of topics, from wellness and mental health to new principal interviews and boundary changes.

STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL LEADERS

Effective school-based communication is essential to build trust and strengthen the reputation of APS. This has been accomplished effectively through the PR Liaison Program for the past four years, and in FY 2019, SCR expanded upon this with dedicated training and resources for principals and school leaders. SCR conducted a series of communications training sessions for principals during Admin Council, and in small-group breakouts or 1:1 meetings, on topics including back-to-school communications essentials, crisis communications, social media issues management and optimizing School Talk.

SCR also provided regular resources to principals through email and Canvas, including templates for effective School Talk messages, website guidance, and revamped school and program messages and materials. Resources addressed a variety of topics, including dual language immersion, Your Voice Matters, boundaries, Information Services, Career Center growth and Extended Day.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The past two years have been a time of rapid growth and change for the school division, driving the need for deeper community engagement and strategic issues management. Growing numbers of families and other community members utilized online forums and social media to organize or advocate for change in opposition to or in favor of APS policies. As a result, SCR devoted more resources and staff time to issues management and rapid response to protect and strengthen the reputation of APS.

The SCR team added new media monitoring and social listening tools and increased our efforts to proactively manage concerns as they arise in the community. A major focus has been, and will continue to be, on developing messages that combat misinformation and convey actual facts. Continuing to promote positive news stories which bolster APS's reputation and promote the excellence of instruction, schools and programs is equally critical, and SCR will need to continue to innovate and invest in new ways to deliver those stories across a wide array of platforms.

In addition, SCR has worked closely with all departments and schools to effectively and openly share information during boundary changes, strategic plan development, new budgets and the opening of five new schools. Livestreaming, increased video capabilities, information nights, increased training for school leaders, expanded social media and direct engagement with non-English speaking communities are some of the ways SCR has and will continue to connect with the community on these important issues

MOVING FORWARD

In the coming months, SCR will continue to focus on spreading positive news that underscores the APS mission and goals of the 2018-24 Strategic Plan, while organizing events and executing communications plans to celebrate the opening of five new schools. Building on lessons learned from the boundary changes and other community engagement efforts, SCR will also focus on continuing to expand communications to effectively navigate issues and build trust with all stakeholders.

The following are three priority initiatives for SCR in the year ahead:

STAFF CENTRAL LAUNCH

The launch of the APS Intranet will be central to accomplishing the Strategic Plan goals related to an engaged workforce. This new tool upgrades the "Staff Central" brand and will make news, information and resources securely available to APS staff 24/7 from any location or mobile device. SCR is leading the design and development of the employee intranet to provide staff with easy access to essential information, as well as a centralized destination for employee recognitions, social sharing and staff-only news and events.

SCR completed the design and initial development work in March 2019. In late Spring and Summer, SCR will conduct a soft launch, which includes training, soliciting feedback from employee advisory groups, and partnering with other departments to build out initial content. SCR will also focus on

transitioning NewsCheck, the bi-weekly staff newsletter, onto the intranet to reinforce our efforts to make Staff Central the key location for staff news, updates and resources. The official division-wide launch to employees is planned for September 2019.

DIGITAL FIRST DAY PACKET

The shift to digital communications continues with the roll-out of a new annual online verification process for student information. This new process will replace the printed forms that were previously provided to families in the "First Day Packets." Online verification will help reduce paper waste, ensure the accuracy of student information, and streamline the process for families. SCR has begun implementing a plan to inform families about the changes and support principals and administrators, and will continue to communicate through the opening of the 2019-20 school year.

PARTNERSHIP GROWTH

The development of a more formalized framework for recruiting volunteers and expanding APS partnerships is a key APS priority, as part of the focus on providing students with multiple pathways to success. SCR will continue to conduct outreach and organize events to help expand its existing database of nearly 300 partners and 3,000 volunteers. SCR is working with Teaching & Learning and school-based Volunteer & Partner Liaisons to identify and recruit additional partners to support students and provide career opportunities, such as internships and externships, that align with the Profile of a Virginia Graduate.

EXPANDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

ENGAGE **A** APS with

207,000 views of the Engage website (since 2017) **8,600** avg. monthly views

Biweekly updates on news and events reached **1,000+ community and civic leaders**

More than **200 events** and face-to-face meetings with key influencers and organization partners since July 2017

Livestreaming has reached **7,500+ viewers** to date (2018-19) an increase of nearly **100%** since 2017

KEEPING OUR FAMILIES INFORMED

APS School Talk

2,600+ messages sent in 2018-19 (**3,600** in 2017-18)
44.2% Open Rate exceeds industry standard
New "**Friday 5**": 62% Open Rate; 3,600 clickthroughs/month (avg.)

Info Nights & events drew nearly
2,500 attendees and
2,500 online views (up **330%** since 2017)

HS Info Night: 720 attendees / 420 online views
MS Info Night: 750 attendees / 720 online views
Kindergarten Info Night : 1,000+ attendees / 1,400 online views
Summer Activities Fair: 960 attendees

APS website viewership up
38% in the last 2 years
813,000+ Average Monthly Views
1 million+ new users since July 2018

SOCIAL MEDIA REACH & ENGAGEMENT

10,138 likes; **10,485** followers; **69%** video views

14.4K followers; **1.4M** reach; **8.5M** impressions

2.8K followers

#APSBacktoSchool was the **4th top trending hashtag** in the DC region on the first day of school

#APSisAwesome: 6,000 tweets; **8.5M** impressions; **1,115** contributors

VOLUNTEERS & PARTNERSHIPS

2,900+ active volunteers recruited and screened to support schools

250 businesses and non-profits have signed partnership agreements

18 new strategic partnerships established since FY18

Making a Difference newsletter **reaches 4,000+** community members and business and non-profit community leaders per month

MEDIA PRODUCTION

aetv
School & Community Relations

2017-18: **65,000 online views**
45% increase over the previous year
2018-19: **55,000 views** so far
50+% viewed on a mobile device

What's Up **A** PS?

26 episodes
7,548 plays • 1,000+ subscribers

Top played episode: *Teen Stress and Anxiety*
480 downloads

CONSERVING RESOURCES

peachjar eflyers

32,000 subscribers
Eliminated **15 million** paper flyers
Saved almost **2,000 trees**
Saved **$1.3 million** in staff and printing

Digital First-Day Packets will eliminate printing costs and resource use