



Arlington
Public
Schools



School & Community Relations

BRIEFING REPORT

JANUARY 2021



SCHOOL & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The primary focus of the Department of School and Community Relations (SCR) is to enhance communications within Arlington Public Schools, 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 APS schools, departments and community leaders to ensure that all are 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; volunteer and partnership programs; Arlington Educational Television (AETV); and Print Services. Specific services include:

- Disseminating information through a variety of platforms to ensure the community is informed and engaged
- Coordinating email, voicemail, and text message communications to disseminate timely news and information to more than 40,000 APS families, staff and community members
- Conducting ongoing community outreach and facilitating face-to-face meetings and events with community influencers and organizational partners
- Fostering effective media relations by maintaining strong relationships with local media (including Spanish language media), conducting proactive media outreach and coordinating responses to media requests

- Managing the central content of the APS website, delivering training and providing oversight for editors and designated “Web Liaisons” for each department and school
- Producing videos through AETV that showcase school instruction, learning activities, and opportunities for students
- Providing school news and information to constituents by planning, promoting, and executing countywide celebrations, recognitions and information sessions
- Managing APS’s volunteer and partnership program by recruiting, screening, and placing resources to support schools and instruction
- Engaging with the community on APS social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube
- Managing emergency communications about changes in operations due to local, regional, national or weather emergencies

BRIGHT SPOTS

STAFF CENTRAL LAUNCH

SCR launched a new intranet in October 2019 and it now serves as a central destination for all employee information from all departments. The APS Intranet has helped to accomplish the goals in the APS Strategic Plan related to an engaged workforce. This new tool upgrades the “Staff Central” brand and makes news, information and



resources securely available to APS staff 24/7 from any location or mobile device. SCR oversaw the design and development of the Intranet to provide staff with easy access to essential information and a centralized destination for employee recognitions and staff-only news and events.

SCR completed the design and initial development work in June 2019, and conducted a soft launch over the summer and fall, including training, soliciting feedback from employee advisory groups, and partnering with other departments to build out initial content. SCR transitioned 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. Following the launch, Staff Central has grown to an average of **2,000 visits per day** by the end of 2020, with a cumulative total of **512,513 visits since launch**.

Since the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Staff Central has played an important role in keeping staff connected and engaged while teleworking. The Human Resources Employee Relations site is averaging around **3,000 visits per week**, as employees navigate the requirements around reporting during the pandemic. The weekly all-staff email "Inside APS" provides important updates from HR and the Superintendent regarding distance learning and plans for transitioning to hybrid/in-person learning, and links staff to pertinent information and resources on Staff Central.

PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND RETURN-TO-SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

Since late February 2020, SCR has been advising the Superintendent, Executive Leadership and staff on pandemic-related communications. SCR has been sending regular communications to staff and families, including updates about:

- COVID-19
- the closing of schools in March
- food distribution
- virtual learning
- hybrid learning
- athletics
- the Superintendent's weekly update
- reopening plans
- and more.

APS has posted and sent over **30 coronavirus and food distribution messages** and almost **60 return-to-school messages**. SCR created a return-to-school section of the APS website to keep families and the community updated on distance and hybrid learning, which includes a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page. Working with DTL, SCR developed **Guides to Distance Learning** and visual models of the virtual and hybrid learning plans. SCR has also created and maintained an FAQ section of Staff Central, specifically relating to staff questions around the pandemic, and distance and hybrid learning. In addition, SCR created the **APS COVID-19**

Dashboard to share guidance and metrics related to health and public safety which APS is monitoring in its decision-making process.

AETV produced six "Return-to-School" video updates featuring Dr. Durán, in English and Spanish, and produced two instructional video series and virtual graduation events:

- The "At Home with APS" video series was created in collaboration with the Dept. of Teaching & Learning to supplement distance learning after schools closed in the spring. AETV produced **6 episodes weekly from April-June** for elementary students, focused on core subjects and social-emotional learning.
- AETV produced K-5 summer school curriculum in July 2020 with **24 episodes of "At Home: Summer School"**
- To celebrate APS Class of 2020 graduates, AETV helped produce **virtual graduation and promotion ceremonies** for all middle and secondary schools and programs, and made the ceremonies available for broadcast viewing and downloading.



Since July 2020, SCR has produced **14 monitoring reports** that have been presented during School Board meetings. SCR has also produced **12 virtual town halls** for staff and families about the reopening of schools. Finally, working with administrative and central office staff, AETV produced two reopening videos for elementary families and secondary families.

CONTINUED EXPANSION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO DIGITAL FORMATS

SCR has continued to send biweekly updates about community engagement opportunities to approximately **1,000 key community stakeholders**, including civic association leaders, who in turn share it with their listservs or include in their newsletters. These updates are posted on the APS website so that they can be accessed in multiple languages by automatic translation.

During the pandemic shutdown, SCR quickly expanded community engagement opportunities to digital formats, producing 12 virtual Town Halls from June to





December 2020, each of which offered **simultaneous interpretation into five languages** including American Sign Language. In June, six of these Town Halls, attended by a total of approximately 1600 people, introduced the new Superintendent and provided updates to the community, including a session conducted entirely in Spanish. The July 2020 Community Town Hall on Reopening had even greater participation, with **4,200 attendees** and livestream views, and the October 16 Community Town Hall had **over 7,500 participants**.

CELEBRATIONS FOR FIVE NEW SCHOOLS & BUILDINGS

SCR coordinated ribbon-cuttings and opening celebrations for **5 new schools/buildings** in the fall of 2019.

- Montessori Public School of Arlington Ribbon-Cutting and Open House – Thursday, August 29
- Dr. Charles R. Drew Elementary School Dedication and Open House – Saturday, September 21
- Dorothy Hamm Middle School Dedication and Open House – Friday, October 4
- Alice West Fleet Elementary School Dedication and Fall Festival – Saturday, October 19
- The Heights Building Ribbon Cutting Ceremony – Saturday, October 26

NEW VOLUNTEER AND PARTNER PROCESS AND POLICY

Volunteers are the heart and soul of every community, and it is the spirit of giving that inspires action. SCR kicked off the 2019-20 school year with a new visitor management system, Raptor, that allowed APS to screen volunteers and partners more effectively. Since September 2019, **8,512 volunteers** have been vetted through Raptor. Recruiting efforts, highlighting volunteers in the periodic Volunteers & Partners newsletter, and featuring volunteers across social media platforms has helped the volunteer program continue to blossom.

The updated **Volunteers & Partners Policy (K-14.30)** was approved by the School Board on November 5, 2020, to ensure the safety and security of students and staff by detailing the new screening and approval process all applicants must undergo when applying to volunteer with

APS. The policy and subsequent policy implementation procedures (K-14.30 PIP-1 Partners, K-14.30 PIP-2 Volunteers, K-14.31 PIP-1 Volunteer Programs) outline the program goals and align the policy with the best practices of other school divisions in the region.

DIGITAL FIRST DAY PACKET AND PARENTVUE

The shift to digital communications continues with the roll-out of a new annual online verification process for student information. SCR led the transition from the printed forms that were previously provided to families in the “First Day Packets” to the Annual Online Verification Process (AOVP) starting in the 2019-20 school year. Online verification has helped reduce paper waste, ensure the accuracy of student information, and streamline the process for families. SCR launched a comprehensive campaign to inform families about the changes and support principals and administrators.

For the 2020 AOVP window that concluded on October 30, a **71% completion rate** was achieved with a total of **19,364 completions**. Currently, a total of **81% of families** have an active ParentVUE account. Having families activate their ParentVUE accounts during the 2019-20 school year prepared the school division for the COVID-19 pandemic. Since most APS families had active accounts, they were easily able to receive and verify information in ParentVUE.

COUNTY COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

County Communications

SCR has been part of Arlington County’s Joint Information Center (JIC) since the pandemic began. The JIC is an essential tool in crisis communications that allows for collaboration in communications efforts. APS has been able to share County information on testing sites, rental assistance, COVID updates and more, while the County has disseminated APS messages on topics like food distribution and Comcast Internet Essentials.

Comcast Internet Essentials

SCR collaborated with the Department of Information Services, Arlington County and Comcast to set up and promote free “Internet Essentials” subscriptions to APS families who needed an internet connection to participate





in Distance Learning. Through the partnership, **455 APS households comprising 886 students** were able to subscribe to Comcast Internet Essentials at no cost to them.

Census 2020

APS actively participated in the Census 2020 Complete Count Committee, led by School Board Vice Chair Dr. Barbara Kanninen, with the goal of counting every member of every family living in Arlington. To support that, APS crafted a Census Schools Action Plan to communicate with students, staff, and families, to educate and encourage all community members to be counted. Census lessons were incorporated into school curriculum, and APS produced and shared a video highlighting Census statistics in schools. Over 30 APS affiliates served as official Census partners and SCR utilized all communications platforms to share Census messages, in multiple languages, regarding the importance and safety of completing the Census, and its value to ensuring funding and support for schools. Arlington County was able to achieve a **Census 2020 participation rate of 99.98%**.

100th Anniversary of Arlington and the 19th Amendment

SCR also collaborated on two Arlington centennial commemorations in 2020. For the 100th Anniversary of Arlington, staff met with key committee members to produce a video highlighting key milestones in the last 100 years that also charted the changing demographics and rich diversity of Arlington residents. SCR also represented APS for the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment with Arlington County's WoW Women's Employee Resource Group, to help commemorate women earning the right to vote in the United States. Nineteen events were held, ranging from a trivia night to a leadership summit that included student participation and an APS student panelist.

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:

- **INSIDE APS** launched in October 2019, taking the place of the former biweekly internal NewsCheck newsletter and is now shared with all staff weekly, driving employees to Staff Central for the latest news and information.
- **Virtual Town Halls** – Twelve virtual town halls for community and staff, held from June to December, drew in close to 19,000 participants, with more than 38,000 views on Facebook. The community town hall in October alone had 7,500 participants.
- **Bi-Weekly Monitoring Reports** – Since July, SCR has produced the Superintendent's return-to-school and school year 2020-21 monitoring reports that have been presented during School Board meetings. The report includes key health and safety metrics, updates on PPE, budget implications, instructional updates and more.
- The **APS Friday 5 Newsletter** launched in September 2018 to replace the bi-weekly APS NewsReview, providing families and the community with more user-friendly and engaging weekly news and information. The *APS Friday 5* also responds to family and staff feedback on "message overload" by bundling five main messages and positive stories in one weekly, roundup email.
- **WhatsApp en español** is a social media platform used by SCR to reach families who do not have the time or ability to keep up with APS SchoolTalk messages. Short messages in Spanish, with weblinks, are shared with parent leaders and/or Bilingual Family Liaisons, who in turn share with their school-specific WhatsApp parent chat groups. Meal schedule updates, emergency closures, Superintendent weekly messages, and other priority messages are sent via WhatsApp in Spanish about 2-3 times per week.
- **Expanded Video Capabilities** have enabled AETV to capture more stories and topics in varying formats, leading to a **nearly 200% increase** in video views since 2017. The addition of livestreaming and events posted on Facebook LIVE doubled the reach of Information Nights and other events.



- **Multilingual Video Captioning** – AETV is testing a new tool to generate captions into different languages for select videos, via Google Translate. While not a perfect translation, the function will dramatically increase comprehension of key video messages for limited-English speakers. The selection of languages is still pending, but currently includes Spanish, Mongolian, Amharic, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Chinese and Urdu. Costs are still being determined, but the goal is to implement the tool for less than \$1,500 per year.
- **APS website enhancements**, like a new, improved automatic translation feature, 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.

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. The pandemic and resulting school closures have also resulted in a shift in how SCR communicates and engages with the community, requiring innovation in how we digitally communicate a large volume of complex information and rapid updates, in an ever-changing environment. As a result, SCR devoted more resources and staff time to issues management and rapid response, to keep the community informed and to protect and strengthen the reputation of APS.

The SCR team added virtual Town Halls and virtual public meetings to our engagement strategies, requiring new training and coordination, utilized new media-monitoring and social-listening tools, and increased our efforts to proactively manage community concerns as they arise. We pivoted to virtual informational events, finding new ways to deliver essential information at information nights, graduations and other recognitions.



A major focus has been and will continue to be on developing messages that concisely communicate essential information in multiple languages to our diverse community, using visual cues as well. We also collaborated more closely with County communications counterparts, on an ongoing basis, to disseminate essential information to the broader community about health metrics, food, technology and internet connectivity, mental health services and other resources.

Continuing to promote positive news stories which highlight the excellence of our teachers, our instructional delivery, and our 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 limited-English speaking communities are some of the ways SCR has and will continue to connect with the community on these important issues.

MOVING FORWARD

The following are three key priority initiatives for SCR in the months to come:

RETURN-TO-SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

In the coming months, SCR will continue to focus on informing staff and families about return-to-school plans, and communicating factual information about health and safety, instruction, services and support during the transitions back to classrooms. SCR will be equally focused on sharing improvements and successes in distance learning, as well as challenges to overcome, as many students will continue learning remotely. Clear, timely and effective communication during these transitions is essential and is a priority for SCR.

SCHOOL NAMING

As a result of school moves adopted in Feb. 2020 and the opening of the new elementary school at Reed, SCR will lead several naming processes to take effect in the 2021-22 school year, including the new neighborhood school at Key and the new school at the Reed site, as well as a renaming process for Key Immersion.

CONTINUED COLLABORATION WITH ARLINGTON COUNTY

SCR will continue to partner and collaborate with Arlington County in an effort to push out key messages for both organizations to keep the community informed during this health emergency. SCR is working closely with County Communications on the vaccine rollout and related communications as part of the Vaccine Committee.

REACHING OUR COMMUNITY

March 2019–December 2020 Data

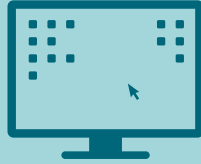
KEEPING OUR COMMUNITY INFORMED



9,300+ messages sent
250% increase over 2018-19
90% Open Rate
exceeds industry standard by 200%



APS Website
viewership up 9%
in the last two years



608,500+ views
of the Engage website
increase of 190% over 2018-19

11.8k likes; 13.2k followers; 227.8k video views

18.3k followers; 9.1 million impressions

5k followers
increase of ~25%
Overall social media reach



avg. **2,000 visits per day**
by Dec. 2020
512,513 views since launch

ORIGINAL MEDIA CONTENT



193,800+ views
of video content
increased nearly 200%
since 2017-18



6 new episodes (32 total)
11,646 plays; 2,300+ subscribers
Nearly doubled
in the past year



PANDEMIC RESPONSE

12 Virtual Town Halls
21,061 participants overall
7,500 participants at a single event
38,300 Facebook views



26 weekly Superintendent's Updates

40 InsideAPS staff messages



14 Return-to-School Monitoring Reports



40 new "At Home with APS" videos
10 new pandemic-related videos
125,300+ online views

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



More than **170 community events**
and face-to-face meetings, averaging
13 in-person engagements/month
before March 2020

Info Nights and Activities Fair

3,192 in-person attendees

3,567 online attendees



Livestreaming events have reached
167,473 viewers
increase of over 2000%
since 2018-19



8,634 Volunteers now registered;
up **198%** since 2019

