

ASPRA*tions Award Nomination

Arizona School Public Relations Association

Nominee: Chandler Unified School District

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Category 1

COPPER MEDALLION

How Chandler Unified District meets the criteria:

I. Research and Analysis

The public relations program for the Chandler Unified School District is an essential component of our district's 10-year long-range plan called [Journey 2025](#). Comprehensive *research* and *analysis* (described below) enables us to:

- develop the *strategies* that will help us successfully meet the broad *goals* outlined in the Journey 2025 long-range plan
- create and clearly articulate meaningful and measurable *objectives* for putting these strategies into action
- determine appropriate *metrics* for measuring the progress we make toward achieving our objectives
- adapt and refine our *tactics* based on the data
- use continuous *evaluation* to reveal current organizational strengths and inform the need for additional improvements, and
- *share* the results of our progress widely with staff, families and the greater community.

Our communications plan addresses both internal and external relations, including hallmarks of Blue-Chip public relations programs such as **key communicators** and **surveying and evaluation**. Goals and objectives have been established for the following areas:

- marketing
- social media
- media relations
- recognition programs
- superintendent's breakfasts
- governing board breakfasts
- external publications
- internal communications
- collaboration with outside organizations, and
- programming on the Chandler Unified-operated Chandler Education Television.

The district hires a third party, **WestGroup Research**, to survey our parents and community at large as well as to conduct a survey of all 5,000 staff members. The surveys are conducted annually. This research helps the district understand perceptions and determine the communication plan each year. Because the surveys are conducted annually, the district can evaluate the effectiveness of its communication.

This research and the subsequent communication strategies have helped the district maintain its market share, as evidenced by:

- attracting 4,000 students from outside of its boundaries (a net influx of \$24 million), and
- keeping the 10,000 CUSD students and their families who are shopping for schools by providing a wide choice of attractive instructional programs and environments (generating another \$60 million in revenue for Chandler Unified).

II. Planning

Our communications plan components are organized below into three categories: *Internal*, *External*, and *General/Community* communications.

Internal Communications

We recognize that our employees tell our story to the world for us. We also know that any official communication coming from the superintendent (or the district office) is not as powerful or effective at sharing our story as the *direct word of mouth from our staff...* like conversations with a bus driver or interactions with a school front office receptionist. Thus, our communication plan's sequence and priority was to first strategically target sharing our message with the very people that our community knows best: our 5,000 employees.

Here is an outline of the crux of our internal communications:

- **Weekly staff newsletter:** [The Staff Report](#) is the primary vehicle for reaching the district's work force of 5,000 employees. The employee newsletter provides teachers and support staff with news and rationale on issues. The *Staff Report* is delivered to their inbox every Monday morning – so when they login in the morning, it is the first thing they will see. A supplementary publication called the [Direct Link](#) features a message from the superintendent and focuses on single issues.
- **Governing Board breakfasts:** Governing Board members visit schools several times a month to address issues important to that site and to rally the troops.
- **Superintendent's breakfasts:** Unlike the board breakfasts, the Superintendent's monthly breakfast features between 30 and 40 employees from various sites, providing employees opportunities to interact with the boss in an informal environment (away from district office).

- **Communication Committee:** This group called the District PRIDE Committee is made up of employees from all sites and schools. Topics addressed by the committee include recognition, participation in community events, and site public relations.
- **Constituent Comment line:** A dedicated telephone line has been established to allow employees an avenue to address any concern or issue anonymously or to provide feedback.
- **Annual Staff Rally:** The district brings in a motivational speaker to tackle issues that may be facing the district at the time... for instance, this past year we hosted Brian Woodland to facilitate conversation related to diversity.
- **Super Q Communique:** Chandler Unified uses a *Quality Through Shared Leadership* (QSL) collaborative approach to all big-picture issues, including budget agreements and salary and benefit schedules. The QSL group consists of an equal number of staff members representing support, certified and administrative staff. The group speaks with one voice and distributes a [Super Q Communique](#) to provide updates and final results.

External Communications

Arizona is the *parent choice capitol of the world*. Families can choose any school, in any district – so competition is intense. External communication is also critical to help pass financial elections that benefit our classrooms. Thus, the priority of our external communication efforts is to strategically build trust and customer satisfaction first by:

- marketing and providing useful information digitally to parents and the community
- providing a wide variety of methods and opportunities for our families and the larger community to offer us feedback
- actively seeking and listening to input offered, and
- lastly, sharing results of our surveys and the continuous improvement efforts based on the results.

Here is an outline of the crux of our external communications:

- **Key communicators:** Components include a survey of approximately 300 community leaders, breakfast and presentation of [our annual report](#) and emailed messages to the group as necessary. The results of the survey are used to tailor the district's communication plan to address the perceptions of the public.
- **Annual parent and community survey:** In addition to the survey of our key communicators, we also poll our parents through a third party to garner input on perceptions and areas for improvements in a number of areas – from school lunches to transportation to curriculum. All **employees are rewarded financially** if the district meets its goal for "overall grade."
- **"School of Choice - Premier District of Choice" Advertising campaign:** Because Arizona has liberal Open Enrollment laws and we are the *charter school capital of the world*, it is necessary to tell the story of Chandler Unified School District through advertising in:
 - [Parent magazines](#)
 - [Cox Communications commercials](#)
 - [Ads on websites](#)
 - [Social media campaigns](#)
 - [Direct mailers](#)
 - [Outdoor display ads at bus stops](#), and
 - Sponsorship of children's programming on PBS (KAET-Channel 8).

Our annual budget is \$100,000.

- **CETV programming:** The district operates a [24-hour-a-day educational access channel](#) that promotes school programs, activities and success stories. News magazine programs and shows hosted shows by principals and board members are among the highlighted programming.
- **Media relations:** All media inquiries to the administration and schools are funneled through the Community Relations Director, who coaches administrators and teachers about public relations implications prior to their encounters with reporters. Information is provided daily to the five newspapers that cover our district.
- **Community participation:** The public is encouraged to serve on committees ranging from budget, growth, calendar and discipline. Participation is not

token. The budget committee, as one example, is charged with developing balanced M&O and capital budgets for the next year. Administration, teachers and classified staff each cast one vote. The remaining 25-plus votes are cast by community members. Another example is our calendar committee consisting of 80 people, 40 of whom are parents.

- **Participation on Community Committees:** The Director of Community Relations has served on the Board of Directors and Executive Committee for the *Chandler Chamber of Commerce* and serves on various community committees with the *City of Chandler*, *Chandler Regional Hospital*, *Chandler Chamber of Commerce*, *Rotary*, *For Our City* and *United Way*. The director played the role of “Mr. Chandler” in the City’s successful efforts to become named an *All-America City*.
- **Superintendent’s Parent Advisory Council:** The superintendent meets quarterly with 43 parent leaders, one from each school, to keep them apprised of district activities and for two-way communication about issues.
- **Constituent Comment Line:** A dedicated number, 480-812-7001, allows the public to comment on concerns 24 hours a day. The line is monitored daily and callers receive immediate responses.
- **“Budget 101” presentations:** The district provides more than 100 presentations to community groups, parents and staff annually to educate the various constituencies about school funding.

General/Community Communications:

- **Recognition Programs:** Twice each year the district hosts a Night of Recognition at the Chandler Center for the Arts. The Governing Board honors volunteers, staff and students from each of our 45 schools and presents special recognition to individuals, schools or teams who have earned state or national prominence. Festivities at the event, which draws approximately 1,000 people, includes student talent.
- **Specialty publications** for various departments and schools and annual reports are part of our comprehensive communications plan.
- **Portraits of stability:** Unique among school districts in Arizona, CUSD has had only six superintendents in the 90-plus year history. Portraits of these

leaders are prominently displayed at the district office, demonstrating the district's stability.

- **Social Media Communications:** The district has made social media a priority to enhance communications in 2017-2018:
 - We started with recognizing a "Social Media Post of the Week" in each staff newsletter, and chose a yearly winner to be recognized at the [District Night of Recognition](#) in the spring.
 - In addition, we ran several social media campaigns throughout the year, including our highly-praised "[Senior Highlights](#)" campaign to market our brand and showcase that we are a premier district of choice.

Due to these efforts, we saw a nearly **1,500 follower increase** on [Facebook](#). (For comparison, the previous year we only increased our followers by 600.) On [Twitter](#), we also saw an increase in impressions, tweets, profile visits and followers – a net increase in impressions of more than **76,000 in May 2018**. (For comparison, the previous year we only had a net increase of 29,000 impressions.)

III. Audience identification and communication

The communications strategies vary by our audience. We have three different audiences and use different communications tactics for each.

1. **Staff** – CUSD Employees are the first story-tellers of the district. It is imperative that they will be able to tell our story effectively and advocate for the district. Communication methods for staff include: Staff newsletters, Governing Board Breakfasts, Superintendents Breakfasts, Communications Committee, SuperQ Committee, Direct Link, Annual Staff Rally and Recognition Programs.
2. **Parents** – Aside from staff, our parents are the key advertisers of our district. We are the premier district of choice and parents advocating for and showing why they chose us is vital. We communicate to our parents through, annual parent surveys, parent advisory council, [social media campaigns](#), and advertising campaigns: including [online ads](#) and [cable tv commercials](#), [parent magazines/ newspaper ads](#), [direct mailers](#), [bus shelter ads](#), PBS programming and community participation.

3. **Community** – It is important to us that the perception in the overall community of the district is positive. As we have a very large senior population in our community, it is a high priority that they are involved in our schools and the district as a whole. We offer “[Golden Circle](#)” passes to seniors so they can get into any of our home school events or sporting events at no charge. Additionally, community relations staff serve on community boards such as the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, For Our City, Chandler Regional Hospital, to name a few.

Prioritization and Sequencing of communications to different audiences

Experience has shown us that careful consideration must be taken to correctly prioritize and sequence communications to our various audiences. An example from the 2017-2018 school year can illustrate:

Using our emergency notification system (School Messenger) to inform our various audiences of an evolving police investigation at one of our high schools

1. PREPARATION:

The emergency notification system had been already setup with:

- a. pre-made contact lists to send to each of our specific audiences
- b. sample messages to use as templates for crafting new messages
- c. training done in use of the system, on PC and mobile device
- d. each team member responsibilities identified, and
- e. sending rights assigned.

2. USE OF DATA:

Qualitative experience and feedback from parents – mainly from calls to the schools and district office – are continually used to refine our methods. (*Texts and email* are the primary distribution methods used now for emergency notifications, for example, after having discovered that sending *voicemails* during school hours led to panicked parents calling back without even checking the message.)

3. SEQUENCE and PRIORITY IN SENDING THE MESSAGE:

- a. **First**, email is used to send message drafts within a set group of district administrators including the superintendency and principals/directors of the main departments affected by the message. The message is finalized for distribution.

- b. **Second**, the finalized message is sent to all **staff** (district-wide or school-wide as appropriate), district administrators and the governing board, so they aren't caught off guard and feel good about being kept aware of the specifics and any upcoming press conference or news segment.
- c. **Third**, sending messages to **parents**, including letting them know of any upcoming press conference or news segment.
- d. **Fourth**, press conference, governing board meeting and/or news segment targeted to the larger **community**.

IV. Evaluation

Chandler Unified contracts West Research Group Research to conduct the annual surveys using quantitative methodologies. Survey results are linked below:

- [2018 Staff survey results](#)
- [2018 Parent and community survey results](#)
- [2017 Staff survey results](#)
- [2017 Parent/Community survey results](#)

The results tailor messaging for the district each year as we celebrate strengths and address issues of challenge, whether they are real or perceived.

Description of Quantitative Methodologies

A full description of the quantitative methodologies used in the staff and parent/community surveys are described in the documents linked above, with examples from 2018 survey results excerpted below:

- **2018 Employee Opinion Survey:** The Chandler Unified School District (CUSD) commissioned WestGroup Research to conduct an employee opinion survey, the primary purpose of which is to gain insight into overall perceptions from employees about the District. [...] A total of 2,336 employees completed a web survey, for an overall response rate of 49%. The margin of error for the total sample is +1.5%.
- **2018 Parent/Community Survey:** This report presents results of a telephone survey conducted for the Chandler Unified School District (CUSD) to measure attitudes of District residents and CUSD parents regarding their opinions toward the District and the quality of education in local schools. [...] The total weighted sample (n=607) has a margin of error of +4.0% at

the 95% confidence level. The subgroup of CUSD parents (n=401) has a margin of error of +5.0%.

Description of Qualitative Methodologies

A description of the many qualitative methodologies and sources used in CUSD for evaluating our comprehensive public relations plan are described in detail in the *External Communications* section and excerpted below:

- Key communicators, community participation on district committees (including budget, growth, calendar and discipline), participation by district staff on community committees (including committees of the Chandler Chamber of Commerce, City of Chandler, Chandler Regional Hospital, Chandler Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, [For Our City](#) and United Way), the Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council, and Constituent Comment Line.

Below are three representative examples of objectives defined and measured in order to reach our comprehensive Journey 2025 goals of marketing our successes to become a "Premier District of Choice," increasing enrollment and maintaining market share:

EXAMPLE 1:

Informational objective: To increase awareness in our community of the many opportunities to become a part of district committees (in this example, our calendar committee).

Motivational objective: To motivate community members to become a part of district committees (in this example, our calendar committee) so they can give input into the decisions made and increase buy-in.

Behavioral objective: To make community members more satisfied with the results of district committees (in this example, our calendar committee), as indicated by a high rating in satisfaction reported related to our modified year-round calendar.

- **2018 Community Survey Results (Quantitative methodology):**
Three in four District residents (74%) report being "very" (53%) or "somewhat" satisfied (21%) with the CUSD modified calendar in place since 1996. A vast majority of current CUSD parents (94%) expressed satisfaction with the District calendar with 80% being "very satisfied."

EXAMPLE 2:

Informational objective: To increase awareness in our community of the many successes of our high school graduates.

Motivational objective: To motivate parents of prospective students to consider CUSD a successful and desirable school district.

Behavioral objective: To increase the enrollment in our district schools which, according to demographics of the area, should be declining.

- **2018 Community Survey Results (Quantitative methodology):** More than four in five current CUSD parents indicated they feel CUSD students are being either well prepared or somewhat prepared for college and post high school training (83%). This represents a rebound from a significant decline last year to 79%.
- **Market share data results (Quantitative methodology):** CUSD attracted 4,000 students from outside of its boundaries (a net influx of \$24 million), and keeping the 10,000 CUSD students and their families who are shopping for schools (generating another \$60 million in revenue for Chandler Unified).

EXAMPLE 3:

Informational objective: To increase awareness in our community of the priority we place on safety of our students and the value we place on diversity.

Motivational objective: To motivate parents of prospective students to consider CUSD a safe, diverse and respectful place for their children to attend.

Behavioral objective: To ensure not only that children ARE safe in our schools, but also to increase the perception that our schools are safe, diverse and respectful places to be.

- **Feedback from Governing Board and Superintendent's Breakfasts (Qualitative methodology):** This past year we realized there was a perception of a safety concern in our schools, so we moved to hire five new safety officers to address this concern mid-year. Additionally, we realized there was a perception issue regarding diversity in our schools. We created an equity and inclusion diversity committee. We hired a social services employee and an equity and inclusion officer for the district to address these concerns.

Summary of Chandler Unified Overall PR Program

Chandler Unified School District is proud of its overall public relations program that features comprehensive strategies for communicating with students, staff, parents and the community. An annual survey of the community by a third party helps the district understand perceptions and determine steps with communication issues and strengths.

The public relations program is so embedded in the district's philosophy that it is included in the district's 10-year strategic plan called [Journey 2025](#).

Weekly newsletters and recognition programs for staff, students and volunteers and a marketing program named "[School of Choice – Premier District of Choice](#)" are among the hallmarks of the program.

Chandler Unified operates 24-hours-a-day Chandler Education Television and uses video to promote all of its schools and departments. In 2016, the district won three Emmy awards for its documentary on the history of its schools.

By working to evolve its excellent reputation, the district passed seven financial elections in a span of 12 years to provide hundreds of millions of dollars to enhance the school environments.