

Amador County Unified School District & County Office of Education

Communication Audit Report - May 2016

SCHOOLPRPRO

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Background

Amador County Unified School District and Amador County Office of Education work closely together to provide seamless educational services to the Amador County community. As of the writing of this audit report, the ACUSD and ACOE are engaging in a system-wide effort to examine a variety of areas of the organization. There is also a transition in the Superintendent and Educational Services leadership positions from long-term leaders, to the current interim leadership and eventually to new long-term leadership. The purposes of this communication audit project is to document the current communication assets of the district, assess current stakeholder perception of organizational communication and provide a series of recommendations for systems and skillsets that will serve the organization in the future.

Audit Sources

- Survey - April 27 and May 9, 2016
- Meetings with organizational department leaders in group meetings and one-on-one
- Experience during website redesign project in April and May 2016

Survey Methodology

The survey was distributed to staff using district email with a link to the form, posted on the district Facebook page, sent to the Amador Ledger Facebook page and sent to board members to distribute through their community contacts. Responses were gathered between April 27 and May 9, 2016 in the Typeform Survey platform. The 69 respondents used the following methods to complete the survey:

- PCs & Laptops 33%
- Smartphones 58%
- Tablets 9%

Survey Respondents – Type & Years Associated with Amador

1	Parent or family member of a student	35 / 52%
2	Community member, not a parent or staff member	9 / 13%
3	Teacher	7 / 10%
4	District support	6 / 9%
5	Site support	5 / 7%
6	Site administrator	3 / 4%
7	District administrator	2 / 3%
8	Student	0 / 0%
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1	More than 15 years	27 / 39%
2	Between 10-15 years	12 / 17%
3	Between 6-10 years	9 / 13%
4	Between 3-6 years	8 / 12%
5	Between 1-3 years	7 / 10%
6	Less than 1 year	6 / 9%

Quantitative Results

Questions 3-9

How would you rate your knowledge of the following aspects of the Amador County Unified School District or Amador County Office of Education? (1-5)

Our mission

68 out of 69 people answered this question



3.03

Average rating

Our plans

67 out of 69 people answered this question



2.49

Average rating

Our policies

68 out of 69 people answered this question



3.19

Average rating

Events

68 out of 69 people answered this question



3.06

Average rating

Our accomplishments

69 out of 69 people answered this question



2.96

Average rating

Our day-to-day operations: lunch menu, transportation, calendar

69 out of 69 people answered this question



3.58

Average rating

Challenges or issues facing our district or county office

69 out of 69 people answered this question



2.94

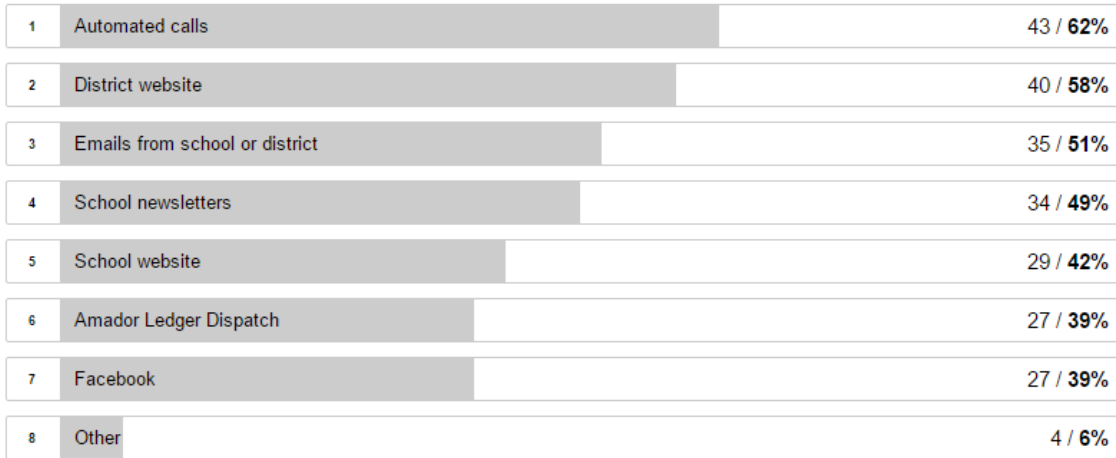
Average rating

Question Highlights

- Respondents feel they know the most about Amador's day-to-day operations, policies, events and mission.
- Respondents feel they know the least about Amador's plans, accomplishments and challenges.
- Amador's plans received the lowest percentage in this question group.

Question 10

Please select each of the ways you have received information about our schools and programs:



Question 11-17

Please rate the effectiveness of our communication tools. Please skip the methods you haven't used. (1-5)

District website

62 out of 69 people answered this question



2.58
Average rating

School website

62 out of 69 people answered this question



2.74
Average rating

Automated calls

62 out of 69 people answered this question



3.47
Average rating

School newsletters

61 out of 69 people answered this question



3.31
Average rating

Emails from school or district

59 out of 69 people answered this question



3.20
Average rating

Amador Ledger Dispatch

56 out of 69 people answered this question



2.61
Average rating

Our Facebook page

51 out of 69 people answered this question



2.27
Average rating

Question Highlights

- Respondents rated school newsletters, emails and automated calls as the most effective current communication methods.
- The Facebook pages, websites and Amador Ledger Dispatch were rated lowest.

Question 18

Which best describes your impression of communications within our district and county office of education?

1	Gives us a limited amount of information	32 / 48%
2	Keeps us adequately informed	16 / 24%
3	Doesn't tell us much at all about what's going on	13 / 19%
4	Keeps us fairly well informed	4 / 6%
5	Keeps us fully informed	2 / 3%

Question 19

What is the best thing about communications in our district or county office of education? (Open-ended)

- School-level communication
- Automated calls
- Friendly and small

Question 20

Are there any specific communication tools you think we should be using or using more often? (Open-ended)

- District website
- Social media
- Text messaging

Question 21

How would you improve our communication? (Open-ended)

- District website
- Social media
- Newsletters/emails
- Build trust
- In-person opportunities

Findings and Recommendations

Web Presence

In the quantitative questions and open-ended questions, the topic of the district website came up as an issue to immediately address. The positive news is that shortly after the survey closed, the new district and county office website was launched to the public. The initial feedback on the new site has been positive. There are a number of actions in this area that will continue to ensure that the website is a strong communications asset for the organization, including:

- Continue to ensure it is mobile friendly as the results of the survey indicate a large number of stakeholders are obtaining information through their smart phone. The current content management system allows each department to edit their mobile version to ensure it is easy and accessible.
- Tap someone in the district office to be the central webmaster. While each of the department webmasters have stepped up to take on maintenance of their department content and the IT department will manage any technical issues that arise, it is important that the organization have an overall content manager. There are a variety of options for fulfilling this function – for example, it could be added to the role of the Superintendent’s administrative assistant, a new part-time position could be created or outside services could be obtained.
- Continue to train district and county department webmasters. As these positions transition to new employees, it is important that this training is passed on to the new employee. This function could be served in a “train the trainer” model in which someone at the district becomes the WIX website system expert, perhaps IT personnel or the central webmaster.
- School websites should not be overlooked and need to be supported through technical assistance in building sites that are needed as well as providing site webmasters with links to district level news and calendar items to keep content fresh and connected. It would also be helpful to have a group of school webmasters work with the organization to develop minimum guidelines of expected information for school level sites.

Social Media

The organization has a Facebook page with a number of followers (500+). However, there have not been many posts over the past six months, an average of about one per month and many times to address a rumor or negative issue. Facebook is a powerful communication tool that could be used much more widely to promote the great work of the schools and organization. Some of the recommendations for improvement include:

- Collecting the positive accomplishments from school sites as well as departments would provide ample posting opportunities. Ideally, the organization would be posting to the Facebook page a minimum of once per week and could rotate among the school site awards, accomplishments, events and surveys.
- In addition, the organization should work toward an annual content calendar that would plan potential postings related to the monthly events – for example back-to-school, holiday traditions and performances, open house events, sporting events, academic milestones, LCAP forums and graduations.
- Similar to the recommendation for the central webmaster, the function for managing the Facebook content – postings as well as addressing stakeholder comments –

needs to be assigned to a specific individual or outside services should be obtained to ensure this tool is maximized.

Internal Communication

One of the areas that came up as issues in the survey in the quantitative and qualitative sections was stakeholder confusion and interest in knowing more about the organization's larger vision and specific plans for implementing the vision. Much of this confusion is understandable given the transition the organization is undertaking in a number of areas and will likely be solved through leadership consistency and communication. In addition, the following recommendations may be helpful:

- Planning is already underway for school and department employee group workshops prior to next year that will focus on the organizational vision as well as the school site or department's role in that vision and assistance in development of their own specific plans.
- Advisory groups that invite representatives from the school sites and departments to meet regularly with organizational leaders, ask questions and receive information and updates would ensure that sites and departments feel better connected to the larger vision and that organizational leaders are hearing direct feedback about how policies and procedures are playing out at the front line. This has the added benefit of expanding the number of people within the organization that can spread the word about plans and accomplishments with the community.
- Collecting accomplishments from throughout the organization will serve a number of purposes – the accomplishments will provide content for ongoing communication in all of the organization's platforms (website, Facebook, etc) and when pulled together annually, it can provide an impressive report that can be turned into print or electronic publications to be shared with community members and used for obtaining key partnerships, grants and other positive opportunities for the organization.
- These accomplishments can also help each of Amador's employees develop specific "elevator speeches," short descriptions of the organization and their role in it that focus on positive changes, future plans and statistics that show progress. For most community members, the person that they know that works within the Amador school system is the expert and most trusted source. It is just as important to arm each employee with the positives as it is to have them printed in a newspaper or posted on Facebook.

Face-to-Face Outreach

While many of the recommendations in this report are related to developing mediated communication systems, it is important that the organization maintain the strengths of the community, face-to-face relationships that have been developed over the years. For example, the organization's preschool department is very involved with the regional First Five council. Employees should be encouraged to get involved and serve as representatives within community groups – to provide organizational information to community partners as well as to learn about potential opportunities and partnerships that benefit Amador students. In addition, Amador could consider:

- Developing a "Key Communicators" group of community leaders that could be brought in from time to time to provide feedback on potential changes as well as receive updates about organization accomplishments.

- Review the annual calendar for opportunities for “touchpoints” with families and community members. There are a number of annual events happen on a regular basis and bring people together. These are prime opportunities for Amador to provide and collect information without planning additional events. For example, during back to school and open house events, consider providing site leaders with organizational updates and/or collecting feedback from attendees about key issues.

District Calendar and Newsletter

Electronic newsletters came up as a potential improvement to communication from a number of respondents and the addition of a districtwide calendar would allow everyone to contribute information about events and deadlines that are important for families and community members. As part of the recent website redesign, Amador now has a Google calendar that is displayed on the homepage and the opportunity to add a newsletter sign-up “pop-up” that will ask website visitors to sign up to receive organizational updates. It is recommended that Amador take full advantage of both of these features, ideally through the same person that is functioning as the central webmaster.

Media Procedures

Media ranked very low as an information source for community members. Amador’s Executive Director of Personnel is currently drafting an organizational policy on how to respond to inquiries and will be very helpful when the organization faces potential media-related issues and concerns. In addition, Amador should work diligently to increase the number of positive items provided to local media, which can be maximized through the accomplishments collection recommended under the Internal Communication topic. In addition, the following recommendations could be helpful in this area:

- Once the media policy is established by the organization, it would be helpful to provide training throughout the organization on the policy. During a crisis, media will likely go straight to the site and site-based leaders should be prepared. During this training, site leaders could also learn about the system for collecting accomplishments, potentially a Google Form, to make it easy to access on or off a site network.
- In addition, it would be helpful to develop and maintain a centralized list of area media outlets and interest areas, including community organization newsletters to ensure that there are regular updates to local outlets.

Data-Driven Decisions

One of the common comments in the survey was an appreciation that the organization was taking the time to ask stakeholders for their feedback. In the past two months, Amador has undertaken two such surveys, one to ask employees about their preferences for professional development and one that served as the basis for this audit. Amador should continue to use survey tools and ensure that the feedback they receive serves as the basis for planning and decision-making. Specifically, the communications survey should be conducted annually so that the organization can see this year as a baseline, continue to review the effectiveness of specific tools and monitor the community for communication trends that can be helpful for the organization.

Communication Systems and Annual Communication Plan

While this audit report has suggested a number of tools that can be effectively utilized to improve the organization's communication efforts, ideally these tools would be documented and listed within the strategic goals of a 3-5 communication plan based on the organization's vision. As a starting point, this report provides an example of a communication worksheet that can serve as a brainstorming tool for organizational leaders thinking through the communication strategy of a given change, event or accomplishment. It can also be completed and collected centrally as part of an annual report of communication efforts to document the efforts in this area.

Additional Considerations

Brand Identity

There are a number of different treatments of the Amador logo, and while the website has a specific color pallet based on the logo, the district publications in general lack style consistency. The board has previously expressed an interest in the development of a new organizational logo, possibly as a result of a community or student-based contest. This would bring in new, community-based design ideas as well as increase engagement with the community through the implementation of the contest. However, Amador should be prepared to hire a professional designer to polish the eventual logo winner to ensure that it works in a variety of communication platforms.

Student Photos and Privacy

Many of the suggestions in this report involve sharing the accomplishments of the organization, which likely involve the images of achieving students. From school public relations research we know that information that is accompanied with photos is much more likely to be read and shared in the community. Student safety and privacy is paramount, but there are a number of ways that other districts have struck a balance to promote students while protecting them. For example, in the annual notification process, families can be asked to fill out a form that lets a school site know if there are particular concerns within the family that would preclude that student's image from being used within organizational materials. Limitations on the naming of students in photo captions, from no name to only first names, is another strategy that districts have successfully used. This policy should be reviewed with stakeholder review of pro and cons of different strategies to find the balance that best serves Amador.

Email Protocols

Through my personal experience in working with Amador on the website and communication audit as well as comments from staff, the email filtering that has been used in the past has had a limiting effect on external to internal communication and added a burden that has impacted staff productivity. Looking to improve in both of these areas, the Amador Technology staff recently implemented a new solution that is less limiting and should improve the email situation for staff. In addition, there was a comment from a respondent that not all employees have access to an email account. If there are items that are being shared exclusively through staff email, every employee should be assigned an account.

Crisis Communication planning

While it was not included in the scope of this audit, it would be helpful for Amador to review their organizational crisis plans and pull together a team of individuals from sites and departments that can assist in the development of an organization wide crisis communication plan that provides specific protocols and responsibilities for Amador to take the lead during a school-related or community-based crisis. During a fire in a previous year, there was a community gap in information that Amador was able to help fill through their automated calling and Facebook efforts. Proactive planning in this area with stakeholders groups could ensure a coordinated and effective approach.

Addendum – Communication Options Worksheet

This draft communication options worksheet can be amended as options are added or changed. It can serve as a brainstorming tool to decide on the best communication options for a given topic, and also as a tracking tool to assist in measuring effort and effectiveness of different tools.

ACUSD Communication Options Worksheet

Project or Issue _____

Tool	Description	Audience	Selected
AUSD eNewsletter	Electronic newsletter based on web signups	All	
Letter/flyer to families	As needed from the DO	Families	
Flyer posted	At school sites and DO as needed	All	
Staff letter	Letter or paycheck stub message	Internal	
Events /Calendar	District web site listing	All	
News item	District web site listing	All	
Department item	District web site department information item	All	
School web site item	School site web site listing	All	
Board email	Board only	Internal	
Leadership email	Leadership group only	Internal	
District email	All employees, groups of employees	Internal	
Community email	Collected lists, key communicators	All	
Student automated call	Sent by school site	Families	
School site parent mtg	Organized meeting with parents at a school site	Families	
School site staff mtg	Organized meeting with staff at a school site	Internal	
School signage	Message posted on the sign in front of school	All	
Classroom mtg	Organized meeting with individual classes	Families	
Media advisory	Sent to invite media to an event	All	
Media release	Written after an event	All	
Media story	Provided to community papers	All	
Facebook	Posted on district FB page	All	
Neighborhood mtg	Organized meeting with community	Region	
Brown bag	Lunchtime mtg with group to discuss issue	All	
Student automated call	Sent by district office	Families	
Staff training	Training or workshop on particular item	Internal	
Parent mtg	DO meeting with parents	Families	
Staff mtg	DO meeting with staff	Internal	
Survey	Online survey on a given topic	All	

Notes:
