

Oyster River Cooperative School District
Communications Workshop Notes
June 8, 2022
7:00 p.m.

School Board Members: Michael Williams, Denise Day, Dan Klein, Yusi Turell, Matt Bacon, Heather Smith

Administration Present: Dr. James Morse, Suzanne Filippone, Josh Olstad

Guest Presenter: Amy Sterndale

Presentation:

Amy Sterndale, a current communications director with 32 years of communication and marketing experience, presented her slideshow “Communicating at ORCSD Input to Action” to the school board. Amy used feedback collected from the district communication surveys to create goals and action steps for the board to consider. A 2019-2020 Communications Board Goal, put on hold due to COVID-19, is a present focus for the board and superintendent. The goal includes the following:

- 1. Create common expectations related to formatting and content of news and provide training for those designated at all levels to adhere to those guidelines.**
- 2. Ensure ORCSD Web Page is the hub for district news.**
- 3. Review & Update Board Policies and create engaging content.**

Amy encouraged the board to think of communication changes as a long-term process that includes but are not limited to someone “owning” it, setting clear expectations, and allowing for time needed to move forward. The ideal outcome would be better and more efficient communication, less complaints, increased engagement, a better & bigger community, and the ability to bring together 415 potential communicators in the district. Amy shared a chart with the board that classified the survey feedback into themes and highlighted the areas most in need of improvement. A few of those areas are staff and leadership not demonstrating proper communication, leadership not prioritizing best communication, and families feeling frustrated & missing opportunities to engage. Amy’s recommendation is to hire one person, a communications manager, trained in communication to do the job well. It would be a person that would have the forethought to think in terms of where the communication will live, the accessibility of it and how it is presented, in addition to training staff in best communication practices. She pointed out that the district currently does not have the compacity to manage the website content since staff are already busy and asked to do more each year, and most staff are not trained in communication.

Amy identified the need for centralized communication since in the current system there are many ways leadership, teachers, clubs, and sports are communicating. Parents feel it is very hard to locate the information they need since they may have to look in many places and if information is not replicated in multiple channels, it may be impossible to find. For example, one event that was advertised in a hard-to-find PDF resulted in only seven attendees. Amy said it will be important to figure out what forms of communication the district needs, what is most effective, and create best communication practices for the district. Michael Williams acknowledged that information coming from clubs, sports, and PTO are often done in different social media platforms. Amy recommended making decisions about which social

media to use and to use it in a thoughtful manner. Other areas to address are email, websites and calendars, which Amy felt a communications manager could streamline with a consistent tone. Regarding email, Amy suggested an immediate practice for staff to put into place this fall. She stated every child, no matter grade or school, should receive an email from their teacher stating how they plan to communicate, how often, and how parents can reach them. She said a plan for communication sets up a positive and predictable channel to alleviate guesswork and cut down the number of emails. Yusi Turell agreed that parents would be more engaged if they knew what was going on.

Amy stated there is technology available to set up and manage calendars so that everyone in the district knows when fundraisers, performances and events are occurring across schools and grades. Denise Day shared her desire for events to be promoted to the entire community to increase public participation.

Looking at next steps, Amy reemphasized that a change takes at least two years. There will be a need for time to develop new systems and templates as well as the investment of people, software, and training for on-going learning. She stated there are a lot of opportunities to fix communication and favored hiring a communications manager to overhaul all websites and calendars, train staff in best practices, and create a handbook for external and internal communications.

Discussion:

Dr. Morse stated that \$50,000 is available in the budget and wondered how that amount could address the communication goals by creating a full or half time role. Amy and some board members expressed that the amount might appeal to a young person, but it would be hard to live on the amount in this community. Amy felt that increasing the amount to \$60-75k may result in a better quality and more experienced person, and another real possibility would be finding a part-time person that has the credentials and experience but may not need the benefits. For example, a stay-at-home parent with a communications background may want to reenter the field with a part time position. Amy and board members agreed that the person would need to love OR and the community, and the day-to-day work of the job. Although there would be ebbs and flows with the number of events, Josh Olstad could see a communications manager being busy all year. Board members talked about investing money and time upfront to give a better tradeoff in the long run to achieve change and efficiency. Amy stated that she is willing to provide consulting work in the first year and mentor a new hire to get the role started. She said the “what” would need to be defined since she is not currently working in the school district. Dr. Morse felt having Amy to build relationships would be beneficial in helping staff be more receptive to change. He wondered about bringing in an intern and encouraged the board to look at redirecting \$15k to bring the starting salary up to \$65k. Board members asked about additional costs, such as investing in a new website, and it was acknowledged those costs would be part of the IT budget. When asked about his role, Josh stated it should primarily focus on technical issues verses providing content for the website, but right now he is trying to do both, and it is difficult. Web based platforms were discussed and it was agreed that the current one being used might not be the most efficient. The board discussed parameters for a new website, and Josh felt functionality and efficiency are vital. He said the current one is time consuming, and it can take a full day to compose and send an email that should go out across the existing channels. He has surveyed other schools and has realized they too are struggling to find the right platform. Amy agreed it is a robust process to get it right. The board discussed the advantages and disadvantages of an in-house vs commercial server, agreeing that a pre-created

template by a company who knows schools and what they need may provide better specialization and efficiency. Board members recognized the importance of understanding privacy rights for photos, images, and tags, and agreed that someone with educational experience and/or a communications background would be important to the role. Board members shared their thoughts on several areas, including if a website should be changed prior to a hire, whether problems should be fixed for the short-term vs an overhaul, and how Amy's role should be defined. Amy felt a new hire should start sooner than later. She did not feel the person should be told exactly what to do, rather they should have autonomy to be creative and put their stamp on the work since they will be the one growing into the lead role.

To consider for next time they meet:

- Talk to Dr. Morse and get questions answered on how a communications manager might work
- Look deeper into the budget to reallocate money and possibly add to the \$50k that could be spent
- Consider Amy as a lead senior consultant and a new hire as an 80% position
- Figure out language for a role considering the titles "junior", "part-time", and "intern"
- Identify a job description that will encompass experience, flexibility, credibility, trust, and commitment with the capacity to shift 415 people
- Identify year one goals and outcomes of the position, as well as evaluation and adaptation for future
- Decide if they will hire for August and move fast or wait to get the right person if they do not find one for the fall
- Read Amy's job description and decide what needs to be tweaked and/or identify what is missing to present a draft for the next Administration Team meeting on June 21st