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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Finding the right people for the team

Your communication program is only as effective as the people on the team. Whether you are a manager who is responsible for filling important communications positions or a member of the larger interviewing team, it is helpful to brush up on best hiring practices to find the best talent for your district.

### Have a clear understanding of the position

First, understand the job description. If your colleagues think public relations is about “spin,” it may be time for a refresher course to understand what a professional communicator does and why your district needs one. Defined by the Public Relations Society of America, “public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” [www.prsa.org/all-about-pr](http://www.prsa.org/all-about-pr)

The National School Public Relations Association further defines school public relations:

“Educational public relations is a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive two-way communications process involving both internal and external publics, with a goal of stimulating a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the organization. Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support.” [www.nspr.org/getting\\_started](http://www.nspr.org/getting_started)

If your district hasn’t had a formal communications program before, it is helpful to define communications objectives and develop a school board policy in support of the program before recruiting a communications professional. This definition will help guide hiring decisions and serve as a useful reminder of the school board’s goals for both the new public relations professional and her colleagues on the leadership team.

The policy should emphasize two-way communications and include objectives for the program such as keeping the public informed about policies and programs and specific functions such as serving as a liaison between the district and the media.

The policy can be detailed and specific but must be feasible for the proposed staff resources. If the communications program is new to the district, it may start with a one-person department. Reasonable expectations will take into account the amount each communications function and initiative will take. It is also important to note that the program is coordinated by the public relations professional, but board members and all staff are part of the communications team.

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For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Washington State  
School Directors' Association

NSPRA's sample public relations policy begins by defining these team expectations:

“The Board of Directors believes it is the responsibility of each Board member, as well as each employee of the District, to actively pursue a two-way communications program that highlights the educational experiences in the city's public schools and promotes effective school/home/community partnerships.

The Board recognizes that citizens have a right to know what is occurring in their public school system; that Board members and all school administrators have an obligation to see that all publics are kept systematically and adequately informed; and that the District will benefit from seeing that citizens get all information, good and bad, directly from the system itself.” [www.nspra.org/getting\\_started](http://www.nspra.org/getting_started)

### **Find good candidates**

Before posting a position, districts must define their specific public relations needs and wants. A general P.R. job description may fit your district's particular needs, or you may want to prioritize your goals to hire for a specific skill set.

Typical public relations functions could include marketing, project management, public engagement and community relations, financial communications, media relations, social media, survey data analysis, crisis communications or finance levy campaign management. Communicators can be generalists or specialists. The best candidates cover most of these standard bases but may bring specific skills for your district's particular needs.

Most communications professionals also have a combination of strategic and technical skills. They must be able to think strategically to develop communication goals and objectives and have the technical skills to be able to implement tactics to reach them. Important technical skills include news writing and editing, basic survey techniques, website management, desktop publishing for digital and print publications, graphic design, social media, photography and videography.

It may be a challenge to find a candidate who has high-level skills in all of these areas and is a strategic communicator. If the position is new to the district, the program may start at an entry-level salary, which means that the focus is more likely on the technical skills to create a presence on the web or on social media or create materials. This task-based work will still help the district build community connections and increase the visibility of district programs and operations. As the program grows, the need for a strategic communicator will increase and can evolve later

### **Communicating clearly**

Good communication skills consistently rank among the most sought after work skills in surveys of employers. The ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing, is obviously at the top of the list in an actual communications position. Be sure to verify this skillset during your hiring process.

Considered non-negotiable, writing is the basis for all of the work in a communications office. You can't implement the strategy if you can't express it clearly. Seek proof of clear, fast writing by asking for writing samples, checking references and giving a writing test to candidates in the final round. Provide a scenario and ask for samples for a variety of media and audiences.

Also consider whether your communications professional will be the spokesperson for the district. Will the superintendent or other administrator fill that role, or will you shift the responsibility for public speaking to the new hire? Verify that they can project confidence and trust and represent the district with a professional image and articulate response.

### **Sample job descriptions**

To help you craft a job description for a new communications position, review samples for four positions on the NSPRA website:

#### **Chief Marketing and Communications Officer**

[www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription1.pdf](http://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription1.pdf)

#### **Director of Communications and Community Engagement**

[www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription2.pdf](http://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription2.pdf)

#### **Executive Director of Communications and Strategic Planning**

[www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription3.pdf](http://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription3.pdf)

#### **Executive Director of Community Relations**

[www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription4.pdf](http://www.nspr.org/files/JobDescription4.pdf)

### **Resources**

#### **Getting Started: PR Tools**

[www.nspr.org/getting\\_started](http://www.nspr.org/getting_started)

#### **Communication E-Kit for Superintendents**

[www.nspr.org/communication-e-kit-superintendents](http://www.nspr.org/communication-e-kit-superintendents)

#### **All About Public Relations**

[www.prsa.org/all-about-pr/](http://www.prsa.org/all-about-pr/)

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*Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant*