



Streamlining Communications: Improving communication with parents

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How digital communications should be



Digital communications should be nicely organized, structured and neat.

How digital communications was in the North Vancouver School District



We heard from staff and parents in the North Vancouver School District that they were drowning in messages. Message after message, information was coming from all directions and piling-up until none of it made sense.

Communication with both staff and parents lacked organization. The Communications Department at the school district was constantly being asked to distribute information. The process was to send out each individual item as it came in, resulting in hundreds of messages being sent out haphazardly. For the most part, information was sent to principals and they were asked to distribute it to staff or parents. This approach had three major flaws:

- 1) principals are incredibly busy and this was another task thrown on their plates;
- 2) information was sent at varying dates and times, so some parents received information much later than others and sometimes events or registrations were full already; and
- 3) tons of emails!

The school district needed to better organize communication with parents and staff. But how? What would actually work? What would create change, and change that sticks?

We listened



Qualitative feedback: We assessed the complaints, input, feedback and questions made to the Communications Department and other departments from staff, parents, School Trustees, and others relating to communications.

Communications Committee: This is a District Representative committee comprised of all partner groups, including: the North Vancouver Board of Education, North Vancouver Parent Advisory Council (NVPAC); District Student Leadership Council (DSLCL), North Vancouver Teachers' Association (NVTAA), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Local 389), and North Vancouver Administrators' Association (NoVA). We asked each partner group representative to go back to their members and bring back their top concerns relating to communications.

Employee Engagement Survey: We asked all staff for feedback, which included feedback relating to communications.

What we heard

- Lack of transparency
- Have no idea what is happening at the School District level
- Too many emails
- Disorganized communications

What we are doing to address concerns

New communications protocols

We established new communications protocols for the school board office (Education Services Centre). These protocols are based on mass emails going out, and are divided into two sections.

1.



No one should be sending information to the Principals and Vice Principals email group directly. Principals and Vice Principals (PVP) were regularly receiving emails of varying degrees of importance that were not vetted and were coming from all departments at any time. Now there is a process where everyone must submit their notices to go to the PVPs by noon on Friday to the executive assistant to the assistant superintendents. The information is crafted into one update broken up into Action, Information and Reminders. The message is then reviewed by the assistant superintendents on Monday or Tuesday, and then that one email message goes out to all PVPs on Wednesday. So now, PVPs receive one email from the Board Office once a week on Wednesdays. This means that parents are NOT receiving information from their school principals anymore about things such as events, registrations, policies, procedures, school district initiatives, etc. Staff can still email individual principals if they need to communicate with them.

2. “All staff” and “All parent” emails are now scheduled. There are no more one-off mass emails that are sent on demand. There is a schedule of updates for the entire year, and everyone needs to submit their update information to the communications department for review before the communications department sends out the messages.

There are three themed updates for parents:

Events and Registrations



Superintendent's Report



Sustainability News



Note: based on parent feedback, we will incorporate the Sustainability News into the Superintendent's Report moving forward into 2019.

These updates were originally scheduled roughly four times a month (one a week). However, based on parent feedback, they will be reduced to three times a month moving forward into 2019. There will be one Events and Registrations email and two Superintendent's Report emails.

Staff updates: Staff receive six themed updates a month – Human Resources, Learning Services, Staff Newsletter, Superintendent's Report, Sustainability News, and Technology News. They also receive a weekly email every Friday that lists Events, Professional Development and Classroom Opportunities.

These new communications protocols have enabled the school district to not only cut down on the amount of email messages being sent, but also to provide more information. Transparency and communication flow have improved as staff and parents know more about what is happening at the school district level.

Improved websites and staff intranet (staff Portal)

Another important component of the new communications protocols are school district and school websites, as well as the North Vancouver School District staff intranet (called the staff Portal).

Websites:

1. **Fixed the search function.** Old items no longer appear in website searches (ex: past events or outdated flyers). Searches are now limited to the current website (ex: if you are on a school website, your search will pull from only that school website and not from other school's websites or the school district website).
2. **Separated school and school district information.** On school websites, School News & Announcements and School Calendar are now distinct sections. District News and District Calendar are different sections. The school sections are located above the district sections.
3. **New Parents tab.** We have created a new Parents tab on the school district website that is linked at the top of each school website. Within this tab is valuable information for all parents, including information about the various technologies used to communicate with parents (ex: MyEd BC for report cards and attendance, Scholantis Portal for student self-assessments, School Cash Online for school fees and forms). Within this new Parents tab will also be a new PAC section. The PAC section is not quite ready yet, but it will include an FAQ of how to undertake various PAC projects.
4. **Cleaning up the websites.** We are in the process of going through the websites to clean-up old content and streamline information so that information is only located in one place and navigation is easier.

Staff portal:

We have restructured our internal staff portal so that it is easier to navigate. We have also cleaned-up the staff portal; old content has been removed and information has been streamlined so that it is only located in one place. The search function has been fixed. Old items no longer appear in searches (ex: past events or outdated flyers). Searches are now limited to the current portal site (ex: if a staff member is on a school portal site, the search will pull from only that school portal site and not from other schools' portal sites or the school district portal site).

The cleaned up websites and staff portal are important because they support the new communications protocols and the new email updates. Each email update includes items that are written as snapshots. The email updates are written in this manner so that they are easy to scan and are not overwhelming in size and content. Each item in an email update links to more expanded/detailed information on either the school district website or in the staff portal. The full email updates are also posted to the school district website and the staff portal.

Sangha

SANGHA

Also new this school year is Sangha. Our rollout of Sangha was not what we had intended and we apologize for this.

Context

The former system used by the North Vancouver School District for sending mass phone calls and emails to parents had undergone significant changes since the company was purchased by another company. For many years it was used for mass emails and phone calls to parents, including attendance calls/emails. The newly re-vamped system was piloted at several North Vancouver School District schools but feedback was poor. The pilot schools said the new system did not work well for them because it did not allow for schools to load parent and student contact lists. The inflexibility at the school level was a major barrier and would require a district staff member to take on the new responsibilities of creating and managing lists for schools, which get updated daily. It was evident we would not be able to continue with this system.

Scholantis is the company that built and supports the school district and school websites, as well as the staff portal. They are excellent to work with because they are very responsive to our needs. They are now offering Sangha – an email, phone call, text message and app system that will also be able to (in the future) integrate with our websites and internal staff portal. We needed to find a new solution to our former system no longer working for us, and Sangha seemed like a good fit.

Rollout

In late May 2018, we created a communications plan and we followed it. The plan was to pilot Sangha in at least one school in June 2018, offer staff training in June 2018, test the app components over the summer, and have it fully ready for a complete launch in September 2018. However, as we moved into early August 2018, we realized everything would not be ready for September 2018. Thus, we created an updated communications plan for a slower rollout.

The updated plan was to introduce Sangha one element at a time. First, we planned to just use it for email. We anticipated that parents would not notice a difference because it would simply be an email that looks the same. Then we would pilot the app with a few schools. Then we would pilot parent-teacher-interviews with a few schools and pilot forms with a few schools. Based on the pilots, we would make adjustments as needed. Then we would train staff throughout late winter and early spring. Finally, by the end of the school year in June 2019, we would have all schools uses the entire Sangha platform.

However, we ran into two significant issues that we did not anticipate:

- Parents figured out how to download the app, and the app actually worked with their email address. We did not know this was a possibility. First, we did not realize that the format of the Sangha emails would direct people to the app. Second, we thought that even if parents tried the app, it would not work because it was not configured yet.
- Schools started using it for things other than emails before pilots and training were offered. This was a communications error from the school district. It should have been made clear to schools not to use the other elements unless they were part of a formal pilot.

As a result, our slow rollout did not go as planned and our transition to Sangha was not as smooth as we had hoped. Our plan was to train staff internally and pilot elements of Sangha before rolling them out district-wide. Because this did not happen, the learning curve internally was reflected externally to parents. We apologize for this.

Improvements

Based on parent and staff feedback, we have made many improvements to Sangha and are continuing with more improvements.

Improvements made:	Improvements coming in the near future:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved email formatting and attachment handling • Scalability improvements to handle immediate or digest messages sent to all parents in the district • Attendance notifications and emergency messages sent to parents regardless of email subscription status ensures delivery of important operational messages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatic translation of announcements • Scheduled delivery of announcements • Query groups allowing the creation of dynamically updated contact lists based on customizable search criteria, e.g. all Grade 8s, all English 12 students. • Rich message formatting with embedded content and links

- Performance improvements for administrator and teacher web application, especially for district staff and large schools
- Texts for Parent app sign-up delivered from BC area code
- Two-way parent messaging can be controlled on a school-by-school basis to fit the communication model that works for teachers
- Sangha app for Administrators and Teachers: allows teachers and staff to perform basic functions on their mobile/tablet devices (released this week)
- Enhancements to Parent Teacher Meeting events, allowing for on demand reminders, easy closing of sign-ups and visibility into parent viewing

Additional feedback now being followed-up on

At a school district-wide parent event on November 28, 2018 we gathered feedback. Here is what we heard:

Sangha feedback:

- Change the email message subject from Daily Digest because this makes it seem like things are coming daily when they are not. Maybe change the name to Communication Digest, or Information Digest, or 'School Name' Communications.
- Can digests be automatically organized so that teacher communications is always at the top, followed by school information, and finally district information. There needs to be clear distinctions between what is school and what is district (and what is teacher, when teachers start using it).
- If the school district sends something as Digest, but the school sends nothing that day, can it appear to come from the District and not the school?
- Can there be parent choice as to how they receive information? Ex: They choose Digest form or immediate? User needs to be able to choose which channel (text, e-mail, phone, app).
- Can we have our school logos?
- Can we format the messages with fonts, colours, hyperlinks, images, etc.? We don't like all of the attachments, and the plain text messages all look the same.
- Calendar items (*this feedback was from an admin assistant*) – Can we have access to scheduling auto-reminders, so that we decide when reminders go out.

- Calendar items (*this feedback was from an admin assistant*) – we need to be able to see the reports of who received the messages and how (just like we can with announcements).
- Events (*this feedback was from an admin assistant*) – Close sign-ups the day before. Can schools set the close time?

Other communications feedback:

- Only have 2-3 district messages per month to parents and not organized by department (one Events and Registrations and one or two District News or Superintendent's Report).
- Create a communications package to parents about the new communications approaches.
- Create communications materials for parents that outlines the technologies we use as a school district that parents/students will use/see, why we use them, and how to use them.
- Train parents to train parents. Ex: have a training workshop for PAC/parent trainers – PAC's can then set up their own training sessions.

Next steps

- Inform all parents of efforts towards streamlining communications.
- Update parents on Sangha improvements.
- Invite parents to the Sangha app.
- Implement parent feedback regarding Sangha and communications.
- Parent communications survey.

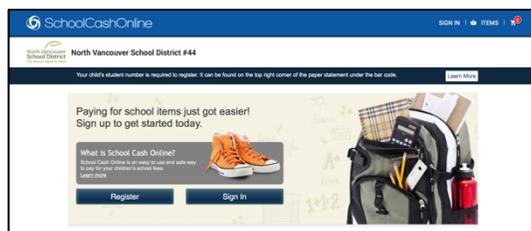
Other communications technologies



MyEducation BC (report cards and attendance)



Scholantis portal (student self-assessments)



School Cash Online (school fees and some permission forms)



Office 365 (student email accounts)

Parent communications flowchart

