

# Park Ridge-Niles District 64

## 2017 Communications Audit Final Report



April 24, 2017

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# **Park Ridge-Niles School District 64**

## **2017 Communications Audit**

### **Final Report**

### **April 24, 2017**

Seeking to secure a third-party review of its communications program, Park Ridge-Niles School District 64 contracted with Patron Insight, Inc. to conduct a comprehensive communications evaluation, sometimes known as an “audit.” Patron Insight – and, specifically, C.E.O. Ken DeSieghardt, who led this effort – has served the communications and research needs of public school districts since 1992. All told, the company has worked with more than 135 school districts in 13 states. DeSieghardt is also the author of *School Communication that Works*, a book that documents the common findings from the company’s work with public school districts.

While the term “audit” tends to suggest an effort focused primarily on deconstructing what has taken place in the past to determine strengths, areas of weakness and necessary changes, the review of past communications content from the district was only one part of this very complete analysis.

In fact, an effective communications audit actually spends more time and energy gathering information designed to locate the “gaps” between:

- *What the district is saying* to its constituents (meaning the topics and messages that seem to be judged to be of most importance, based on the frequency of their appearance in district-produced communications).
- *What the district believes it is saying* and/or views as the most important messages to be disseminating to its key stakeholder groups.
- *What the members of these key stakeholder groups are hearing* and absorbing from this outbound content and, most importantly, *where they feel the district should be focusing more of its energy and messaging* to provide them the information they are seeking.

To gather data helpful in identifying these “gaps,” a detailed set of research steps was undertaken.

- Sample **outbound content** from the district and from its schools for the past (approximately) 18 months **was reviewed**, looking for the messages and themes that seemed to be most frequently on display.

- Thirteen people, identified by the district as **Key Opinion Leaders**, participated in individual, 30-minute telephone **interviews**. During these structured conversations, participants were asked to identify what they consider to be the school district's strengths and weaknesses, what information about the district they believe is well-known in the community, what they wish residents knew about the district, and other key messaging and brand-related topics.
- One-on-one **interviews** – most of them in-person – **with every member of the Board of Education, the Superintendent, her Cabinet and all school principals**. The questions were similar to those asked of the Key Opinion Leaders, with an understanding that more depth was possible with those who were “internal” to the district.
- **Four focus group sessions with members of the community who do not currently have a child attending a District 64 school**. The goal was to secure input on how these individuals see the school district, what they believe the district talks the most about and what they would like to know more about from District 64. The participants in these focus groups were recruited at random (via calls to landlines and cell phone numbers) by Patron Insight, with no involvement by anyone from District 64.
- **A random dial (landlines and cell phones) survey of 400 residents across the district who do not currently have children in a District 64 school**. The topics discussed were similar to those covered in the focus groups.
- **Separate online versions of the telephone survey** that were provided to **staff members** and to **parents**, via a link sent directly to them. A version of this survey for the **community** was also posted on the school district's website, but the participation was minimal (which is not an uncommon situation).

While all key district stakeholder groups were included in this research, the primary focus was on individuals who are not current District 64 parents. As is the case in all school districts, this group presents the greatest communication challenge, because its members do not have the same level of routine interaction with the school district that a parent of a current student does.

In reviewing the information in this report, the data (with the exception of the random telephone survey) is *qualitative*, rather than quantitative. However, it is important to note that **the opinions of more than 1,200 individuals were collected as part of this process**. As such, the findings presented in this report should be viewed as the feelings of a strong cross-section of stakeholders within the boundaries of District 64.

Following this introduction, this report is presented in three sections.



**Section one: Overall results summary**

This section constitutes the equivalent of an “executive summary” of what was learned throughout the process, and what those findings suggest as the best strategic communications steps going forward.

**Section two: Communications audit findings**

Organized under individual “themes,” the findings in this section present more detailed information about each of the key recommendations.

**Section three: Telephone and online survey results addendum**

The report closes with a detailed presentation of the findings from the telephone survey of residents in District 64 who do not currently have a student in a District school, plus the online results from the versions of the survey for parents, staff and the community at large.

## **Overall results summary**

A beneficial communications audit report begins with a presentation of the brand perceptions that are consistently held today – across all stakeholder groups – as a way of setting a foundation upon which to build. These perceptions are formed and nurtured through a combination of the outbound communications from the district and its schools, and from demonstrations of the brand promises in action.

For example, one of the brand images expressed consistently across all the stakeholder groups was the idea of “**community.**”

Specifically, District 64 consists of neighborhood schools (a term used by participants across the spectrum of this research), where children, and often their parents, walk to and from school each day, and where the parents are active, engaged and supportive. Each school’s community has unique qualities, based on the neighborhood, the leadership and the teachers. But the sense – the *feeling* – of community is consistent.

This brand image of community would exist solely within the walls of each district school and its affiliated parent community, if not for the consistent, creative efforts of the district’s Communications Department, district leadership and, in certain cases, the schools themselves, to “get the word out” about how this feeling of community is built and nurtured.

Another brand image that crosses all stakeholder groups in District 64 is “**family.**”

Both in the sense of the school community as being a family, and the school and school district’s commitment to creating a sense of family, this strong, positive message speaks to the efforts of the district and to the demographic realities of the communities of Park Ridge and Niles.

Countless individuals throughout the research process commented on how this is a multi-generational community – meaning that many people who are sending their children to District 64 today were students in the district at one time themselves. (There is also a downside to this phenomenon, which will be discussed later.)

It was also widely reported in the research conducted as part of this audit that “people move here for the schools,” and that the students who live in the district come from “motivated households who value education” and who help their students where and when it is needed.

That last thought ties in with a third consistently held brand belief, and that is the idea of “**education/high-quality education/knowledge.**”

Participants in this process spoke glowingly about the quality of the schools, reporting on that quality from a variety of perspectives.

For example, some talked about the incredible variety of electives available to middle school students, providing almost unmatched opportunities for these students to explore topics and discover interests.

Others talked about how well the district prepares students to transition smoothly and successfully into high school. Many times, this comment was followed up with discussion about the students' success *in high school and beyond*. These individuals attribute much of that success to the “start” these students received within District 64. Given the tilt of the survey participants toward non-parents, the fact that the quality of education is frequently noted speaks volumes about the district's communications efforts on this topic.

Still others mentioned their awareness – usually in a general sense – of the district's commitment to providing students with updated technology, as well as welcoming an evolved approach to teaching, recognizing the value of developing a student socially, emotionally and academically.

The final brand message seen consistently across all stakeholder groups – even among a handful of individuals from the district leadership and Board of Education interviews – was a less positive fact of life in the district: “**high taxes/expensive.**”

High property taxes were often the launching point for this discussion; in fact, one focus group participant stated, without any emotion, that “the school district makes up 41% of my tax bill.” But the conversation on this topic wasn't limited to the individuals' tax bills.

The perception of teacher salaries, administrative salaries, general concerns about “where does all the money go?” and a feeling that the district may not always make the most frugal decisions, were also mentioned in some quantity. (It was quite fascinating, for example, to hear stakeholders describe their takes on the most recent teacher contract negotiations. Many of these observations were clearly assembled from information the respondent had seen or heard through unofficial, third-party sources.)

Whether the stakeholders' reports on these negotiations were accurate or not is immaterial for the purposes of this communications audit. Rather, the fact that this subject was top of mind enough for them to mention it reflects how important the *perception* of monetary decisions is in the general view of the district's brand.

**These four brand elements – community, family, education and taxes – reflect messages that a “typical” stakeholder is mostly likely to use, when describing the district to a newcomer.**

As mentioned earlier, the credit for the prevalence of the ideas of community, family and education goes to the district's outbound communications efforts, matched with demonstrations of these qualities at the district and school level. It is, after all, one thing to *say* that a school has a "community" feel, but it is quite another to show what that means. The district should be duly proud of the efforts that have led to these brand images being so strongly held.

Analyzing the significance of the brand element of "money" or "expensive" requires a bit of discernment.

Specifically, while the views on this topic were, perhaps, somewhat more intense in District 64 than they might be in some other school districts, make no mistake: Every school district in America has a segment of stakeholders that criticizes the size of its tax bill and how it perceives that money is being spent by its local school district. In other words, District 64 is far from alone.

The intensity mentioned above should be somewhat expected; the property taxes that go to fund District 64 are sizable. Add to that the multi-generational aspect of the community, and you are also dealing with a notable segment of individuals who have been in the district a long time, watching their property tax bills increase over the years.

All of this is to say that there is nothing District 64 can do, from a communications perspective, that will lead to a meaningful, broad-based change in this part of the brand perception. In hard dollars, property taxes will always be substantial enough to be a regular topic of conversation in the community.

However, going forward, the *way* District 64 talks about money and its financial decision-making processes can and should, where possible, talk about financial decisions being "value-based" and define the tax dollars coming to the district as, very accurately, an "*investment* made by the residents in the schools," or words to that effect.

Reinforcing the ideas of *investment* and *value* will send a very clear message – with every financial decision – that the Board is working hard to maximize the resources with which it has been entrusted. (More details on this refocusing will be shared in the "Findings" section below.)

Other topics or themes that merit particular attention are as follows (again, more detail to come below):

- **Change.** Concerns about change in a community whose members are satisfied with their schools is always a risk. That risk is amplified as the district continues to implement key components of its Strategic Plan – real-life demonstrations of the district's commitment to continuous improvement.

Making certain that these changes (and any others that are smaller, but nonetheless represent a change from the status quo), are seen as strategic, as part of continuing to make District 64 even better, and as the next steps in building on the excellence the community expects from its schools, will be important.

- **Academic performance.** Residents in every school district across the United States are conditioned to look at ratings, test scores and other similar standard measurements to judge the performance of a district or an individual school. But there is another component that is fast becoming part of the evaluation equation across the country – even if its definition may still not be clear to all – “student growth.”

Recognizing that no single test score or other method of measurement provides a truly accurate evaluation of student achievement, District 64 must take advantage of every possible opportunity to demonstrate how it measures “student growth,” why this more comprehensive approach to evaluation is helpful to the student, his/her parents, teachers and the district, and – where appropriate – the stories of how individual students’ academic experiences and plans have benefited as a result.

- **Building upon the legacy.** The plus and minus of the multi-generational nature of the community becomes notably evident as the district seeks to stay current, while respecting the cherished legacy that makes this district and its residents rather unique.

In essence, it is finding a way to bring along those in the community who too easily fall back on the mantra of “it was good enough for me,” (or those who simply say that their tax bills are high enough and that they don’t want to spend any more money), by respectfully demonstrating how the needs of students have changed and how the district needs to sensibly evolve to address those needs and, in doing so, keep pace with the high expectations of those in the community.

- **Transparency.** Redoubling its efforts to explain the decision-making process, where money is spent, and how students, families, staff and the community benefit from each decision will be an important step, based on the number of individuals who had questions on these topics (albeit often vague questions) in the research conducted for this evaluation.

Like the truth that a school district will never be able to prove its fiscal prudence to *everyone* in the community, there will always be individuals who will believe the school district is not being completely open about whatever the subject of the day may be.



Yet, the goal should always be to demonstrate transparency with such clarity and frequency – even when it may seem unnecessarily repetitive – that the elected Board of Education members and the district’s leadership team are able to maintain a reservoir of trust within the community that creates a decision-making process that is supported in the community.

The goal, therefore, should not be to achieve the impossible – having everyone sing the district’s praises on the issue of transparency – but rather to stack evidence on top of evidence that the district makes every effort to share information.

## **Communications Audit Findings**

**Finding: The outbound content from the district demonstrates consistency, purpose, quality and transparency. It is truly a textbook example of building and executing a strategic communications plan.**

Strong communications programs have a foundation of strategy upon which is built a series of sensible, connected and consistent tactics. A review of outbound content from District 64 from the last 18 months shows that that is clearly the case here.

Specifically:

- **The communication is purposeful and intentional. In other words, it is not just to “get the word out,” but it is driven by strategy.**

For example, the content developed to align with the strategic planning objectives utilized a series of 21st century learning videos that were shown at Board meetings, PTO meetings and community presentations. One message – multiple audiences.

Similarly, the district’s mission, created from the Strategic Plan – “To inspire every child to discover, learn, achieve and care” – is being used consistently across all aspects of outreach, including staff lapel pins, banners, logos on all communications, stationery, etc.

- **There is a clear, ongoing effort to demonstrate transparency and seek engagement from the community at large.**

School district communications to key stakeholder groups represent a living example of yin and yang. The district communicates, invites, encourages participation, seeks feedback...and the community says, “The school district never tells us anything.”

So, a district pushes out *more* content, has *more* events, and creates *more* channels in the hope that everyone who is important to a district’s success can be reached with the information they are seeking. But the pattern often remains the same.

In this relationship, the only thing that can be controlled is a district’s effort. And in the case of Park Ridge-Niles School District 64, *there is no question that the effort is there.*

For example, the district maintains an active online dashboard, providing “at-a-glance” information on test scores, statistics, financial information, teacher development, strategic plan information and other district news.

The district also conducted Thoughtexchange 2016, an online town hall event, seeking input from the community and interacting with those who participated.

In addition, the district utilized a 40-person Strategic Planning Committee and has developed a Superintendent Community Relations Council. The district's e-newsletter has a section that encourages patrons to contact the Superintendent and Board members with questions and comments. And the district's comprehensive Annual Report and Financial Report offer a full presentation on the state of the district and its plans.

- **The district sends messages through multiple communication channels, rather than expecting its target audience members to conform to the venue that the district may prefer.**

At a time when the average citizen is exposed to (by some estimates) 3,000 messages a day, simplicity and repetition are more important than ever.

Consider this maxim from the world of advertising: It takes six exposures to an ad, before the members of the target audience even know who the ad is coming from – let alone what it says. Is it any wonder, then, that it is easy for a parent, a non-parent resident or some other stakeholder to say, “I didn’t know anything about that event,” if it is promoted only once or twice?

District 64 has addressed this issue as well as it can be addressed, by sending the same information through multiple communications channels. In doing so, it is presenting its communications on the varied channels that those in the target audience prefer, not expecting the target audience to seek out the information from the district's preferred channel.

One example of this principle in action is the promotion for Parent U events, which take place via printed fliers, Twitter, Facebook, the district's e-newsletter, and the district's website. The series also was promoted in news releases and school newsletters.

**Finding: Communication about “changes” needs to be presented more individually than collectively, and as benefit-driven improvements for students, parents, staff and the community.**

One of the greatest issues that all school districts deal with has to do with the distance between what they – district leadership, teachers and personnel – know about the exciting and beneficial changes that are taking place in education and how they describe and promote those changes to those who will be most affected.

The implementation of the Strategic Plan within District 64 is an ideal example of this challenge in action.

Outside of the interviews with leadership within the ESC, school principals and Board of Education members, the Strategic Plan was mentioned only rarely by other audiences – and always in a global sense (as in, “I know they have a new strategic plan”). Even the internal audiences were not prolific in their discussion of the plan, with fewer than 50% mentioning it.

Such is the reality of conveying major change to an audience whose members are already overwhelmed by information: It can seem difficult to make the details meaningful enough to be remembered, so the fallback is to use the overarching term (“Strategic Plan”) to launch the conversation.

Solving this not-surprising challenge is essential, if the district is to keep the conversation among key external stakeholder groups moving toward the desired future that has been identified in the Strategic Plan. In other words, that conversation must link the steps being undertaken *back to the Strategic Plan*, rather than expecting the conversation to start with the Plan and work its way to the steps.

Specifically, the “stories” that relate to goals in the Strategic Plan should focus on the change, the step or steps involved in getting to this point, who benefits and then that it is part of the Strategic Plan. This approach recognizes that external stakeholder groups are more likely to grasp and see the value in individual steps first, rather than the entire Strategic Plan. As long as each presentation ends with a “reminder” that this is part of the Plan, the awareness will build over time.

Such a strategy also recognizes the reality that internal audiences are naturally more interested in the details and how they fit together into a full-scale plan, while external stakeholders need to have their attention grabbed by bits and pieces of benefit-driven information.

For example, District 64 held “hour of code” events, to introduce the principles of writing computer code to students. The district has also made use of the Google Hangout platform to connect students with scientists for a discussion – demonstrating how technology can be applied to the learning environment and exposing these students to leaders in the field of science who are not based locally. These are just two examples of the district’s commitment to future-ready learning.

While it may seem counterintuitive to “work backwards” in telling the story of the Strategic Plan and each step of progress towards its accomplishment, it is a fit with how overwhelmed individuals process and retain information. Once they see story after story about individual accomplishments – each tagged with the notation that “this is part of District 64’s Strategic Plan” – the significance of the plan and its long-term benefits will sink in.

In essence, tell the story of “change” a piece at a time, always focused on the benefit of each change, rather than expecting typical residents to have the capacity (or, in most cases, the interest) to work from the top down.

**Finding: Expanding the definition of “academic performance” will be key to effectively telling the student growth story in an era of test scores and rankings.**

One of the most interesting aspects of the research conducted for this communications evaluation was the varying points of view from the different participating stakeholder groups on how best to measure student achievement in District 64.

Many of those who prefer to rely on the familiar standardized student achievement testing and rankings of area school districts by various sources believe that the district is treading water – at best – or falling behind. For example, the term “fall from grace” was reported by a member of the district leadership team as something she had heard about this subject out in the community.

Of course, there were also a healthy number of participants who were almost effervescent in their praise of the district’s academic performance. One key measure of that success for these individuals was how well District 64’s students were prepared to transition into high school and be successful there. To quote one participant, “Students leave District 64 ready for what comes next.”

What has yet to register sufficiently among many members of different stakeholder groups, however, is the broad range of metrics used to more accurately track achievement in District 64. Bringing meaning to the definition of “student growth” – by showing real-life examples of students in action, and utilizing the lexicon as part of telling the story – will help to expand the understanding of how progress *should* be measured.

And, of course, telling the stories of successful students, innovative teachers, and unique programs is always a more personal and approachable way of documenting accomplishments than a long list of numbers.

Make no mistake, the district needs to continue to present and discuss its results on standardized testing, for as long as such testing takes place in its current form (and any evolved form that may occur in the future). A sizeable segment of the population will *always* want to see these numbers, track trends and hear from the district its plans moving forward into the next testing cycle.

But District 64’s move toward a more comprehensive measurement of “student growth” puts it in good company, nationwide. Many districts have done away with class rankings, with naming a Valedictorian and similar traditional ways of evaluating performance, because such approaches have become recognized as less than satisfactory methods of measuring true achievement.



Strategically *expanding* the “performance” conversation to celebrate growth-based accomplishments of students, what those accomplishments mean and how they demonstrate the district’s own academic evolution (in terms of curriculum, classroom teaching methodologies, enhanced rigor, etc.) will have long-term benefits in showcasing just how much District 64 students are accomplishing.

**Finding: Respecting the legacy of the facilities, while building a benefit-driven case for upgrades, will require a deft, step-wise communication approach.**

Reality and perception are running headlong into each other in the case of the school buildings and their current physical state.

As mentioned above, the multi-generational aspect of the community – combined with high property taxes – makes it challenging for the district to convey the urgency about needed improvements. Taxpayers’ own memories of their successful school careers, the family-like atmosphere that is encouraged within the buildings, and the care and attention that has been paid to the facilities to keep them as functional as they are (in spite of their age) can easily create the feeling among the general community that the buildings are fine.

The district knows otherwise, beginning with the estimated \$20-30 million in deferred maintenance issues that are necessary to insure a “safe, warm and dry” school environment, along with the ongoing discussion about the possibility of adding secure vestibules to the entrances of the school buildings that don’t currently have them.

While the vestibule discussion remains an open question, the deferred maintenance concerns are not an issue of “if,” but rather of “when.” The long-term viability of the buildings depends on these upgrades, repairs and improvements being made at some point in the foreseeable future. The problems that exist today will only get worse over time and, as such, become more expensive to fix – if a “fix” is even possible if the delay goes on too long.

When the reality of the need to spend money to make sensible upgrades and improvements is butting up against the concern about spending the money to do so (particularly “when the buildings look fine as is” to many individuals in the community – some of whom, again, were students in those buildings at one time themselves), the focus of the conversation needs to shift.

Each of the buildings in need was built through a financial investment made by community members. That investment created these neighborhood schools that residents cherish so much. *That investment is now at risk*, due to age, routine wear and tear, and systems simply becoming outdated.

By positioning the necessary changes that exist today as a re-investment in the buildings that are the subject of so much affection, District 64 will make it clear that the goal is to protect the facilities so that they can be used by future generations of students.

Just as a homeowner can replace the roof on his or her house without markedly changing the exterior look and feel (and with no change to the interior), the school district can replace an HVAC system, for example, to extend the useful life of the building while maintaining the integrity and charm of the building itself.

While this strategic communications approach may not completely soften the blow of the money that must be spent for the changes currently being planned, it does provide balance between the reality of the need for costly upgrades and repairs with the desire within the community to maintain the schools they know so well. It also sets a solid message in place for discussions about needed expenditures in the future: *Protecting the community's investment.*

**Finding: Demonstrations of transparency need to be persistent, thereby giving those who, today, question the district's decision-making process less of an opportunity to do so.**

As mentioned in the first finding above, District 64 has clearly demonstrated a commitment to transparency, engagement, seeking counsel from parents and other stakeholders, and being available and accountable.

Yet, because of the mix of the high percentage of residents who do not have children in a District 64 school at this time, high property tax rates, and a feeling by some about a perceived lack of clarity from the district about financial matters, communicating about how the district decides to use its financial resources will be an ongoing communication challenge.

A segment of the stakeholders who took part in the research lamented that “people just don’t know how school finance works,” while some Board members and District 64 leaders said that residents “don’t know how hard we work to be frugal and fiscally responsible.”

These are both very true statements – in District 64 and in school districts across the United States. Typical residents do not understand the complex inner workings of school finance, nor do they understand how Board decisions are made on fiscal matters. To move beyond this, District 64 – as most school districts – must come to grips with the fact that these situations are unlikely to change for the majority of residents. The issues are simply too complicated and the interest level is too limited.

When presented with stakeholders who claim to want to know more about financial matters, but who do not generally have the stamina or the interest level to develop true clarity on these issues, what should a school district do?

The solution is to look at financial communications as two distinct steps.

Step one – which District 64 already does very well – is to provide a full accounting of the financial state of the district. This takes place via the Financial eReport, and the sharing of its annual audits and budgets. Regular updates to this information can be gleaned from the eNews and from a review of the minutes (and videos) of the Board of Education meetings. There is also 10 years of financial data available via its website and scorecard.

Step two is to determine a simple, consistent way to present the background and key decision factors for major financial decisions in a way that an average community member would find easy to digest.

For example:

- The specifics about the investment or expenditure
- The impetus behind this investment/expenditure – meaning why was it necessary
- How it will benefit students, staff, a school building, etc.
- The process undertaken to review the options
- How the decision was made – meaning why was the final vendor chosen
- Where the money is coming from – was it budgeted or is it a unique, one-time expense?
- Does this connect to any other expenditure?
- Who is the point person for questions?

While these types of questions are undoubtedly part of the Board-level discussion, this outline (or something similar) is more designed to serve as an easy-to-locate resource to provide “at-a-glance” information about major financial decisions.

A link to these files can be placed on the district’s website and PDFs can be created and sent to those who would like to see the details.

Certainly, this is not the only way the district can further demonstrate its commitment to transparency. It is, however, a good model to follow: Simple, consistent, and repetitive presentations of the pertinent details provide a steady flow of evidence that the “books are open” and that the financial and decision-making information is available for anyone with an interest.

If the frequency of the communication gets to the point where it seems, to the district, like overkill, then it will have just scratched the surface of recognition among the targeted stakeholders. A good way to think about this topic, as noted in the book, *School Communication that Works*, is this simple communications principle about the importance of transmitting information more than once or twice: “Repeat. Refresh. Remind.”

## **Addendum**

### **Telephone and online survey results**

*The numbering shown below is from the telephone survey. Question 1 confirmed that the respondent was either the male or female head of the household. Question 2 confirmed that the respondent did not currently have a child or children attending school in Park Ridge-Niles School District 64. Question 3 secured information about the location of the respondent's residence. Location of residence information is displayed at the back of this addendum.*

**4. If you were describing District 64 and its schools to someone who was from outside of the area, what word or short phrase would come to mind for you? This can be based on things you, yourself, know about the district, or on what you may have heard about the district from others?** *Responses were coded, based on common words, phrases and ideas. Numbers, rather than percentages, displayed below. Only the most frequently mentioned answered are displayed.*

#### **Telephone survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Good/great/excellent schools/district	143
Declining/getting worse	65
High taxes	53
Good community support	34
Don't know	25
Good curriculum	19

#### **Parent online survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Good/great/excellent schools/district	159
Great/caring/engaged teachers/staff	83
Quality education/high standards	51
Declining/just OK/could be better/overrated	32
Meet all students' needs/students first	28
Great/involved community/parents	25
Great programs/electives/opportunities	19
Welcoming/inclusive/family-oriented environment	16
Strong/organized/transparent administrators	15
Poor/arrogant administrators/Board	13
Great/up-to-date technology/resources	11

Out-of-date facilities/lack of space	10
High property taxes/expensive	9
Innovative/advanced/progressive	9
Good communication/informative	8
Need better/consistent communication	8
Poor budgeting/fiscal responsibility	7
Traditional	7
Overcrowded	6
Continuous improvement/striving	5
Poor test scores/ratings	5
Affluent/wealthy	4
Lack of diversity	4
Need competitive salaries	4
No hot lunch/district lunch program	4
Too focused on data/teaching to the test	4
Too much homework	4
Competitive	3
Need better safety/security	3
No full-day kindergarten or pre-K programs	3
Safe	3
Too much focus on technology	3
Great SPED program	2
Poor parking/parking procedures	2

### **Staff online survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Great/caring/engaged teachers/staff	57
Quality education/high standards/commitment to excellence	39
Good/great/excellent schools/district	37
Students' needs first/whole child	25
Declining/just OK/could be better/overrated	18
Poor/arrogant administrators/top heavy	17
Great/involved community/parents	14
In transition/evolving/changing	12
Great programs/electives/opportunities	11
Welcoming/inclusive/family-oriented environment	8
Affluent/wealthy	6
Too much focus on money/business – not schools, facilities, etc.	6
Traditional/conservative	6
Poor morale	5
Great/up-to-date technology/resources	5



Too focused on data/teaching to the test	5
Poor communication/lack of transparency	4
Great SPED program	3
Good/supportive leadership	3
Growth mindset	3
Lack of diversity	3
Neighborhood schools	3
Helpful	2
Innovative	2
Proud	2
Solid	2

### **Community online survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Great schools	6
Great teachers	3
Disconnected with community/Lack of transparency	3
Quality education	2
Great community	2
Lunch program could be better	2
Average	2

As part of this research, residents have shared a lot of different ideas about the district, its schools and its performance. I'm now going to read you a few of the things they have said. After I read each one, please tell me if you Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree or Strongly disagree with the statement. Again, this should be based on what you, yourself, know, or on what you may have heard about the district from others. "Don't know" was not read to the telephone respondents, but was recorded if that was the answer they provided. It was available to online respondents as a choice. "n" is the number of participants in each survey group. The survey from the community members should be considered supplemental information only, due to the low level of participation.

**5. The community is very supportive of the schools in the district.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	30%	57%	3%	6%	1%	3%	87%
Current district parents (n=481)	40%	49%	7%	2%	1%	1%	89%
District staff members (n=253)	28%	56%	9%	7%	1%	0%	84%
Community members (n=32)	28%	47%	9%	13%	3%	0%	75%

**6. The schools are safe and secure from unauthorized visitors.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	14%	52%	10%	9%	2%	12%	66%
Current district parents (n=481)	26%	46%	10%	13%	5%	<1%	72%
District staff members (n=253)	22%	44%	13%	12%	8%	0%	66%
Community members (n=32)	13%	41%	13%	19%	13%	3%	54%

**7. The academic performance of students in the district is steadily improving.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	6%	43%	15%	11%	5%	21%	49%
Current district parents (n=481)	10%	40%	30%	9%	2%	9%	50%
District staff members (n=253)	23%	44%	22%	8%	2%	2%	67%
Community members (n=32)	13%	31%	16%	22%	6%	13%	44%

**8. The teachers in the district are some of the best in this area.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	7%	59%	13%	8%	4%	9%	66%
Current district parents (n=481)	25%	45%	19%	7%	1%	3%	70%
District staff members (n=253)	57%	31%	9%	2%	1%	0%	88%
Community members (n=32)	28%	38%	16%	6%	6%	6%	66%

**9. The school district is open about how tax money is being spent.**

<b>Survey</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage</b>
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	2%	38%	14%	23%	9%	14%	<b>40%</b>
Current district parents (n=481)	11%	34%	27%	13%	5%	10%	<b>45%</b>
District staff members (n=253)	21%	31%	25%	11%	5%	8%	<b>52%</b>
Community members (n=32)	16%	28%	6%	34%	13%	3%	<b>44%</b>

**10. People move here because of the reputation of the schools and the district.**

<b>Survey</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>	<b>Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage</b>
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	18%	65%	6%	6%	3%	2%	<b>83%</b>
Current district parents (n=481)	53%	40%	4%	2%	0%	1%	<b>93%</b>
District staff members (n=253)	53%	38%	6%	2%	<1%	<1%	<b>91%</b>
Community members (n=32)	44%	31%	13%	6%	6%	0%	<b>75%</b>

**11. Aging school facilities in the district are in need of maintenance and physical updates.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	10%	31%	20%	29%	4%	7%	<b>41%</b>
Current district parents (n=481)	27%	46%	16%	5%	1%	5%	<b>73%</b>
District staff members (n=253)	44%	44%	8%	2%	1%	1%	<b>88%</b>
Community members (n=32)	38%	34%	13%	9%	6%	0%	<b>72%</b>

**12. The salaries paid to teachers in the district are necessary, if we want to attract and retain the best educators.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	11%	53%	7%	20%	5%	4%	64%
Current district parents (n=481)	31%	42%	13%	9%	1%	4%	73%
District staff members (n=253)	65%	28%	4%	2%	<1%	0%	93%
Community members (n=32)	41%	31%	13%	9%	6%	0%	72%



**13. The district is heading in the right direction.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	2%	54%	19%	10%	4%	11%	<b>56%</b>
Current district parents (n=481)	12%	48%	23%	10%	2%	5%	<b>60%</b>
District staff members (n=253)	15%	34%	23%	21%	7%	0%	<b>49%</b>
Community members (n=32)	13%	19%	28%	16%	19%	6%	<b>32%</b>

**14. The district makes it a point to actively communicate with residents.**

Survey	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Combined "Strongly agree/Agree" percentage
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	8%	35%	12%	26%	7%	12%	<b>43%</b>
Current district parents (n=481)	22%	49%	17%	9%	2%	2%	<b>71%</b>
District staff members (n=253)	25%	43%	20%	6%	3%	2%	<b>68%</b>
Community members (n=32)	9%	34%	22%	19%	16%	0%	<b>43%</b>

Another goal of this research is to determine whether the school district is providing information on subjects that are most important to area residents. I'm now going to read you a short list of topics. For each one, please tell me if you think the district provides enough information to residents, like you, on this subject, not enough information or too much information.

#### 15. Student academic performance

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	1%	48%	36%	16%
Current district parents (n=481)	1%	64%	32%	3%
District staff members (n=253)	4%	81%	9%	6%
Community members (n=32)	6%	38%	53%	3%

#### 16. Plans for school building repairs and updates

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	0%	37%	52%	11%
Current district parents (n=481)	1%	53%	40%	6%
District staff members (n=253)	1%	69%	27%	3%
Community members (n=32)	3%	44%	53%	0%

### 17. Details about the district's strategic plan, which is called the 2020 Vision Strategic Plan

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	<1%	28%	54%	18%
Current district parents (n=481)	3%	57%	30%	10%
District staff members (n=253)	10%	74%	13%	3%
Community members (n=32)	9%	34%	41%	16%

### 18. School Board decisions and other School Board news

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	0%	32%	59%	9%
Current district parents (n=481)	2%	52%	40%	6%
District staff members (n=253)	1%	67%	30%	2%
Community members (n=32)	3%	38%	53%	6%

### 19. District financial information

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	<1%	34%	61%	5%
Current district parents (n=481)	<1%	41%	44%	15%
District staff members (n=253)	<1%	59%	34%	7%
Community members (n=32)	3%	38%	47%	13%

## 20. Stories about the accomplishments of students

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	0%	47%	43%	10%
Current district parents (n=481)	1%	42%	52%	5%
District staff members (n=253)	1%	51%	45%	3%
Community members (n=32)	3%	38%	59%	0%

## 21. Stories about the work of teachers and staff members in the classroom

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	2%	30%	56%	12%
Current district parents (n=481)	1%	32%	63%	5%
District staff members (n=253)	<1%	37%	61%	2%
Community members (n=32)	9%	22%	69%	0%

## 22. Information about school safety and security procedures

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	3%	48%	34%	15%
Current district parents (n=481)	2%	61%	34%	3%
District staff members (n=253)	6%	68%	22%	5%
Community members (n=32)	3%	53%	44%	0%

**23. Information about how the district prepares students for success in high school and beyond**

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	1%	44%	42%	13%
Current district parents (n=481)	1%	30%	58%	12%
District staff members (n=253)	1%	44%	47%	10%
Community members (n=32)	6%	25%	66%	3%

**24. The curriculum in the school district**

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	0%	46%	40%	15%
Current district parents (n=481)	<1%	43%	53%	4%
District staff members (n=253)	2%	68%	27%	3%
Community members (n=32)	3%	34%	59%	3%

**25. How technology is being used by students in the classroom**

Survey	Too much information	Enough information	Not enough information	Don't know
Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	3%	48%	32%	17%
Current district parents (n=481)	2%	54%	41%	2%
District staff members (n=253)	9%	76%	13%	2%
Community members (n=32)	3%	50%	47%	0%

**26. If you were looking for district news, which of the following sources would you consult? (Telephone wording is used in this report.) As I read this short list of potential sources, please say, “Yes,” if you would probably consult that source, if you were looking for news about District 64 or its schools. If you don’t think you would consult the source, please say, “No.” List was rotated on the telephone survey.**

Source	Telephone with non-current district parents (n=400)	Current district parents (n=481)	District staff members (n=253)	Community members (n=32)
Chicago newspapers, like <i>The Chicago Tribune</i> or <i>The Chicago Sun-Times</i> or their websites	19%	17%	15%	39%
<i>The Park Ridge Herald-Advocate</i> newspaper or <i>The Park Ridge Journal</i> newspaper or their websites	72%	45%	53%	58%
<i>The Niles Herald-Spectator</i> newspaper or <i>The Niles Bugle</i> newspaper or their websites	23%	5%	10%	3%
Local television or radio news	30%	6%	9%	3%
Social media from the school district or from schools in the district, such as Twitter or Facebook	16%	42%	31%	42%
The school district’s e-news newsletter	25%	68%	73%	52%
Social media or blogs that are <u>not</u> sponsored by the school district	7%	16%	11%	23%
Friends and neighbors	70%	58%	36%	71%
Students in the school district	31%	51%	25%	35%
Teachers and other staff members in the district	28%	47%	79%	35%
School principals and assistant principals	14%	42%	52%	23%
The school district’s website or individual school websites	37%	75%	79%	74%
School Board members, either in person, or when a member of the School Board is quoted in the news media	31%	16%	11%	42%
The school district’s administration, either in person, or when a member of the administration is quoted in the news media	29%	15%	25%	16%
The school district’s publications, like its Annual Report or Financial Report	16%	23%	28%	19%
Videos of School Board meetings	4%	11%	42%	19%

27. Are there any other sources that I didn't mention that you regularly consult for news about District 64 or its schools? *Only frequently mentioned responses are displayed.*

**Telephone Survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
Mail/fliers	3
My tax bill	3
At school activities	2

**Parent online survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
E-mails	13
Social media (Facebook, Twitter)	10
PTO meetings/website/blast	9
District website	5
Google/internet	5
<i>Park Ridge Herald-Advocate</i>	5
School newsletters	5
School websites	4
<i>Chicago Tribune/Tribune Local</i>	3
Gossip/word of mouth	3
Neighbors/other parents	3
Teachers	3
My children/students	2
Illinois State BOE website – Report Card	2
publicwatchdog.org	2
School Board meetings/agenda	2
School rating websites – have noticed drop in numbers	2

**Staff online survey**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Number</b>
District website	4
District eNews	3
Park Ridge Watchdog/publicwatchdog.org	3
School Board meetings/minutes/videos	3
Don't know/None	2
School newsletters	2
School websites	2
Teachers	2
Twitter	2

**Community online survey – No substantive comments mentioned by a measurable number of respondents**



## **Demographics**

### **Telephone survey with non-current district parents**

**Number of respondents: 400**

#### **Location of residence:**

In Park Ridge, south of Touhy Avenue – 153

In Park Ridge, north of Touhy Avenue – 138

In Niles – 109

#### **Length of time living in the district:**

Less than 2 years – 5

2 years to 5 years – 28

More than 5 years to 10 years – 47

More than 10 years to 15 years – 61

More than 15 years – 223

I've lived here all my life – 36

#### **Age group:**

18 to 24 – 4

25 to 34 – 46

35 to 44 – 64

45 to 54 – 92

55 to 64 – 105

65 or older – 72

*Refused to answer – 17*

#### **Have children who were students in District 64 who have all graduated?**

Yes – 213

No – 187

#### **Attended a District 64 school yourself?**

Yes – 48

No – 352

**Gender:**

Female – 221

Male – 179

**Parent online survey**

**Number of respondents: 481**

**Schools attended by respondents' children:**

Carpenter Elementary – 63

Field Elementary – 80

Franklin Elementary – 62

Roosevelt Elementary – 85

Washington Elementary – 79

Emerson Middle School – 93

Lincoln Middle School – 69

Jefferson School – 32

*Did not answer – 21*

**Staff online survey**

**Number of respondents: 253**

**Location of residence:**

Inside the boundaries of District 64 – 90

Outside the boundaries of District 64 – 153

*Did not answer – 10*

**Have a child (or children) currently attending a District 64 school?**

Yes – 31

No – 212

*Did not answer – 10*

**Community online survey**

**Number of respondents: 32**

**Location of residence:**

In Park Ridge, south of Touhy Avenue – 16

In Park Ridge, north of Touhy Avenue – 15

In Niles, within the boundaries of District 64 – 1

**Have a child (or children) currently attending a District 64 school?**

Yes – 16

No – 16