

(inter-) CONNECTED:
A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATION
IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Samantha Gati-Tisi

M.A.T., University of Bridgeport, 2010

B.A., Quinnipiac University, 2009

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Presented by

Samantha Gati-Tisi, Ed.D.

<u>Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D.</u>	<u><i>Tricia J. Stewart</i></u>	<u>05/21/2020</u>
Dissertation Committee Chair	Signature	Date
<u>Katie Lever, Ph.D.</u>	<u><i>Katie Lever</i></u>	<u>05/21/2020</u>
Dissertation Committee Member	Signature	Date
<u>Elizabeth Spencer Johnson, Ed.D.</u>	<u><i>Elizabeth Spencer Johnson</i></u>	<u>05/21/2020</u>
Dissertation Committee Member	Signature	Date

2020

Abstract

The advent of social media has, in many ways, changed the way people communicate with one another as it has added a real-time component and multiple platforms from which people can communicate. School districts are not exempt from the evolution of communication into the digital realm. Districts have an obligation to maximize their home-school communication and interactions with stakeholders in positive ways that seek to build rapport and trust with community members. Therefore, this case study sought to understand the ways that stakeholders including school district administrators, Board of Education members, and parents utilized social media to communicate policy and procedures--both formally and informally. Of particular interest, were the types of topics that are raised by parents on social media and how these become manifest as issues that the school district must address. Findings revealed that while the school district had a desire to communicate efficiently and accurately with stakeholders, administrator's varying levels of comfort and knowledge base regarding effectively utilizing social media meant that it was inconsistently utilized for communication. To ensure social media is used effectively districts must create policies regarding communication within the district and maintain consistency of use across schools and stakeholders. Moreover, findings showed that social media groups promote a sense of belonging and community for users. These spaces give voice to community members who might not otherwise be heard and provide the opportunity for inclusive and meaningful discourse from peers. However, not having policies to explicitly oversee the use of social media as way to communicate with the public leaves implementation up to the discretion of the individual school administrator, which leads to inconsistencies in communication strategy across a school district.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Identification of Topic	1
Rationale	5
Statement of the Problem	7
Significance of the Study	8
Definition of Key Terms	8
Overview of the Study	9
Research Questions	10
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework	11
Digitally Divided: The Haves from the Have-Nots	11
Roles and Responsibilities of School Administrators	17
Communication in the Digital Age	25
Uses and Gratification Theory	29
Spiral of Silence Theory	30
Chapter 3: Methodology	33
Study Context	34
The Highlander School District	35
Schools in the Highlander School District	36
Participants	36
Positionality	38

Data Collection	39
Parent, Administrator, and Board of Education Interviews	39
Existing Social Media Data	41
Web-Published Newspaper Articles	41
Reflexive Journal	42
Data Analysis	42
Interviews	43
Existing Social Media and Web-Published Newspaper Articles	45
Reflexive Journal	45
Limitations of the Study	45
Dissertation Timeline	46
Chapter 4: Findings	48
Value of Traditional Communication	49
Need to Improve Community Relations	53
Desire to Communicate Effectively	55
Building Public Trust	61
Digital Communication is Accessible	65
Crossing the Digital Divide	65
Increased Transparency	70
Digital Communication Increases Expectations and Risks	71
Increased Expectations of Communication Standards	72
Fear of Losing Control of Messaging	73

Conflicted Administrator Feelings	75
Official Communication and Social Media	76
Formal Communication	76
Informal Communication	78
District Use of Social Media	80
Gauge for issues	81
Social Media as a Community Good	86
Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Parents Taking Leadership Roles	91
Inconsistent Social Media Across the District	94
Generational Use of Technology	96
Need of Policies and Digital Communication Continuity	98
Lack of Information on How to Engage with District Personnel	102
Widely Held Differing Views on Highlander School District Website	104
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion	110
Overview	110
Discussion of Findings	111
Implications for School Districts	115
Suggestions for Further Research	117
Conclusion	118
References	119
Appendices	
Appendix A: Participant Consent Form	128

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Administrator	129
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Board of Education	130
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Community Member	131

LIST OF TABLES

Research Questions with Data Sources	37
Participants from Groups for Interviews	40
Anticipated and Emergent Codes	44
Dissertation and IRB Timeline	47

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

Communities have a long history of establishing and overseeing education for children. With this local oversight has come a responsibility to share information about education policies, procedures, and practices with community members. For instance, as early as 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, of what would become the United States passed a law that states could require towns to establish schools overseen by public officials, require students to attend them, and fund the schools through money collected from local taxpayers and thus the notion of public schools was born in North America (Gershon, 2016). However, it was not until after the American Revolution that more states began shifting away from only local control and towards a more state-operated school system (Brouillette, 1999). Thomas Jefferson, a proponent of taxpayer-funded education famously stated, “no other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness,” further arguing that democracy and education were interdependent (Carpenter, 2013). This was a shift and move from the more religious-based schools of the early colonies, found in the Northeast, into schools that were publicly funded and operated-to ensure that all citizens had access to the same caliber and content of education necessary to be successful in a chosen career (Mondale, 2002). The shift from homeschooled, parent-controlled education in the Southeast to a public system where a teacher imparts knowledge on pupils created a lasting need for communication between school and home for all schools, not just those in the Northeast. With advancements in industrialization came further changes in education, as society advanced the need for communication between school and family was necessary, so that parents could continue the work of raising and supporting the educating of their children outside of the school day (Gaither, Urban & Wagoner Jr., 2019). In the 1920’s school-community relations became a topic of interest for many researchers,

particularly with respect to the popularity of newspapers for spreading information about local and national topics (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). Just as education has changed with society, as communication practices have also advanced. The need for increased opportunities for clear and easily facilitated communication to take place between organizations and stakeholders is ever present, and also true for school districts.

Today, both the role of school and the ways in which stakeholders communicate about school-related topics have shifted. In the modern age, the role of school is to educate young community members and prepare them to become contributing members not only of the community in which they live directly, but in the greater realm of society on a global scale (Gaither, Urban & Wagoner Jr., 2019). Literacy and numeracy are often at the forefront of this preparation, as emphasized by local and national testing (Elementary and Secondary Act, 1965; No Child Left Behind, 2001). Additionally, schools have become institutions that provide vital services that extend beyond academics, including that schools can also provide safety, nutrition, and community for students; as well as opportunities to engage with new and upcoming technology necessary for the evolving workforce (Rojewski, 2002). In addition, the relationship a school has with the immediate community can greatly impact student learning and the role of school within the community which it serves (Epstein, 1995; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Therefore, school district personnel seek to foster positive relationships between the school and home for a myriad of reasons, but chief among them is that strong communication between school and home leads to increased academic success for students (Fiore, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). An additional benefit of well-established school-home communication is increased socio-emotional connections wherein stakeholders feel a strong sense of community belonging with school as the epicenter of that community (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Some of

the types of communication that school districts engage in range from things like teacher-parent discussion of student achievement and progress to weather delays and closings. Schools can also utilize communication strategies to celebrate goings on in school or to continue to support a child beyond the school day. Higher levels of accountability for student achievement, uncertain budgets, and increasing school-choice options for parents have also created a need for increased communication regarding school programs and curriculum choices (Cox & McLeod, 2014). For example, schools need to communicate individual student performance to parents and grade/school performance averages with local and state officials. This reporting allows parents, school districts, and states to make decisions about individual and community needs in terms of providing educational supports. Other than academic performance, schools also need to communicate with families to provide information about upcoming school events, weather-related closings, or provide information about changes in staffing, or other policies. While traditional education correspondence approaches may include mailers, emails, or even automated school messenger phone calls home informing parents about upcoming events for relaying information (Baule & Lewis, 2012), changes with technological advances have also required school districts to embrace digital technology in the form of email communication and the use of social media as a way of communicating with community stakeholders. Over the past twenty years, Social Networking Sites (Social Media) profoundly changed the way people communicate with one another (Correa, Hinsley & Zuniga, 2010). A social network site is a web-based service that allows users to create a public or semi-public profile, curate a list of other users with whom they are connected, and, at their discretion, share information about their public or personal life (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social media includes webpages, blogs, microblogs, and other forms of technology platforms. Social media allows users to connect with ideas and experiences in real-

time, which provides the opportunity for schools to encourage collaborative and ongoing engagement as well as invite feedback about policy decisions. One of the benefits of ongoing engagement is that it, opens conversations about school-related topics among stakeholders who can comment on social media posts (Dixon, 2012). Such practices empower community members to take an active role within the school district, they also serve as a particularly adroit way for families and stakeholders to vocally advocate within the community on behalf of school issues (Epstein, 1995).

These new technology-based platforms make it necessary for school districts to have explicit policies outlining in what fashion, how often, and about what types of information schools will communicate with stakeholders (Dixon, 2012). Districts need clear and easily accessible policies regarding communication, so that all staff and personnel are on the same page in terms of how they deliver a message to stakeholders. Consistency is important across district communication so that there is understanding from all members of the community. Policies and practices for school, home, and community communication and involvement are often common place at the elementary school level, however, as students move from elementary to middle and high school, partnerships between school, home, and community tend to decline. The exception to this is when clear communication policies are put in places that purposefully maintain these partnerships (Epstein, 1995). Much has been made of implementing explicit educator and student policies with regard to social networking sites, particularly policy created to ensure student safety and mitigate instances of cyberbullying or inappropriate use (Ahn, Bivona, &DiScala, 2011). However, not every school district is prepared for the technological advances that come with social media communication (Twitter, Facebook, Blogs) and many are

unprepared for the challenges that can evolve as school districts use new media platforms to engage in different communication relationships with stakeholders (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

Rationale

Parents, schools, and community members all have a vested interest in the success of students’— academically, socially, and behaviorally. Communication between school, home, and the community members is necessary in order to ensure that students are receiving the education and support then need to be successful; as these three groups represent the three spheres of influence in a child’s formative years (Epstein, 1995). When school, home, and community interact with frequency, the message being communicated is more likely to express a common shared understanding.

Increasingly, parents are interested in taking a more active role with respect to school decision making. At the same time, increases in achievement testing for students, punitive teacher evaluation systems, and implementation of the common core have all become topics about which parents and community members would like their voices heard (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). Social networking sites offer parents a place to connect with other like-minded stakeholders and discuss school-related topics that are important to them (Blumenreich & Jaffe-Walter, 2015). For schools, an understanding of the importance of strong relationships between stakeholders in a school district has increased tremendously in recent years, especially in light of the rise of social networking as a tool of communication (Heath, Maghrabim, & Carr, 2015). Strong relationships with parents and community members have been connected with stronger test scores in numeracy and literacy for students, as well as stronger feelings of belonging (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Epstein, 1995). Homebuyers with school-aged children often look to the schools when making decisions about where to live. A carefully curated website and

community members who advocate and discuss school-related topics online can go a long way in attracting families with children to a particular school district (Dixon, 2012).

Parents, more than ever before, have access to a wide variety of school related information from a variety of sources, which make stakeholders both better informed and at times, misinformed regarding policies related to school. For example, there are social media sites such as RateMySchool.com that are not connected in any official capacity, yet individuals can go there and comment (positively or negatively) about a specific school or school district. In some ways, the increased awareness about school matters that is posted online and is easily consumed by parents with access to the internet has led to increased parental involvement in school matters, particularly when having digital conversations through social media and other web-based platforms. These online engagement opportunities, in particular provide the ability to interact with others through digital posts and comments, have also opened the door for parents to openly challenge decisions made by school leaders (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). In order for school leaders to adequately address issues that stem from social media and community concerns, it is important for leaders to understand how to effectively communicate with parents and other community members about school issues within the ever-changing context of social media and social networking. It is also important for administrators to understand the barriers to communication that impact parent communication and involvement.

In order to better understand the types of matters that arise outside of the purview of school district approved communication, the topics that are raised by parents on social media, and how these become manifest as issues that the school district must address were all of interest for this study. While major corporations employ communication specialists to handle social media, most school districts rely on individuals who are already within the school organization,

often individual school principals are called to utilize social media (Cox & McLeod, 2014). Not surprisingly, these school employees have little formal training as communication specialists. As a result, schools can be in a vulnerable position when community members and stakeholders begin to engage about school issues via social media outlets (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Social media and social networking platforms have evolved to allow people to communicate in rapidly evolving ways. Popular social media sites and applications (apps) for adults, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram boast billions of followers worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2019) with new applications created every day. Daily advances and changes in social media are among the most important reasons for school district administrators to create policies for what types of social media to use for communication and in which ways both formally and informally (Carter Ching, & Hursh, 2010). Parents and school districts are among stakeholders utilizing these platforms to roll out and discuss policies and procedures relating to schools, both formally and informally. The near instant nature of these communications, particularly through tools such as School Messenger, Twitter, and Facebook, have created a culture where policy and personnel are discussed publicly and at times in rapid fashion, with some situations escalating quicker than districts can respond (Caruso, 2013). Understanding the ways in which social media influences the development of public opinion will assist school districts seeking to better communicate about their initiatives and programs. One specific benefit of better communication is that it can lessen misunderstandings, which can have far lasting impact.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study is important for practice and research, as it has the potential to make positive contributions to school districts through increasing what is known about social media and school leaders. School districts have an incentive to maximize their communication with stakeholders in positive ways that seek to build rapport and trust. To better understand what actually transpires through social media interactions in school districts understanding stakeholder perspectives and existing social media posts is essential. This study is also important because it adds an often-ignored voice—that of parents and other community members. These voices in conjunction with the perspectives of official school district representatives together will provide important insights.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Blog- Websites that focus on publishing articles according to date or topic. Some platforms for blogging include WordPress and Tumblr (Dixon, 2012).
2. Digital Literacy- The ability to use information and communication technology to find, evaluate, create, and communicate requiring both cognitive and technical skills (The American Library Association, 2019).
3. Facebook- A social networking website that allows users to communicate and connect digitally (Baule & Lewis, 2012).
4. Private Facebook Group- A Facebook group whose members must be approved by a group administrator; members can be accepted or rejected from members at the discretion of the group administrator (Facebook, 2017).

5. Social Networking Site- Any open, professional, or closed online network that allows users to connect, network, and communicate remotely. Facebook, LinkedIn, and Ning respectively represent each of the three types of online social networks (Dixon, 2012).
6. Social Media- Web-based technologies created to allow for interactive communication between users (Dixon, 2012).
7. Stakeholder- Any persons with a vested interested in the school district including but not limited to parents, administrators, Board of Education officials, and community members (Fowler, 2012).
8. Twitter- A social networking site that allows users to stay connected and to communicate through the exchange of brief messages. Tweets are limited to 140-280 characters (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012).

Overview of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the history of school-home communication and the rationale for this study. In addition, chapter one provides context for this study and the relevance of this work as well as the research questions under consideration. Chapter two is a literature review that grounds the study within the framework of literature that exists about digital communication, social media in particular. The section begins with research about considerations of access to technology and the digital divide, followed by discussion of the roles and responsibilities of school administrators, and an examination of the methods of communication organizations can employ in the digital age. The chapter ends with a look at two theories of communication. Chapter three focuses on the methodology utilized with this study. It describes the context of the suburban community and the school district with its schools. This chapter also-provides information about the process

used to collect data through interviews, social media data, and other web-based sources. The data analysis process of coding and theming is described and a timeline for the research are also included. Chapter four presents the findings of this study, which answer the research questions. Thick description (Geertz, 1973) and participant quotations are used to support analysis of participant interviews regarding social media communication and its place within the school district's communication plan. Chapter five further discusses the findings of this study in relation to the research questions and implications for practitioners--school districts. Additionally, recommendations for further study are presented.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative, case study:

1. What can be understood about social media and school districts from the perspectives of school district stakeholders?
2. What types of policies do school districts formally and informally adopt regarding social media?
3. What types of practices do school districts formally and informally engage in regarding social media?
4. How does social media influence school district administrators, both formally and informally?
5. What topics and areas of interest do parents engage in to communicate with and about the school district through social media?

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communication platforms and strategies for communicating information have evolved over the past hundred years since schools began adopting formal communication plans. Therefore, this theoretical framework examines the areas of the literature that relate to school-home communication. Additionally, a discussion of Social Class is included as access to and understanding of technology-based communication are significant when considering how this type of communication affects stakeholders. Not every stakeholder has access to the technology utilized for communication, which ends up creating an information barrier. The theoretical framework for this study is comprised of an amalgam of research representing multiple viewpoints in the arena of school communication. Topics of particular importance are the impact of the digital divide on communication, roles and responsibilities of school administrators, communication in the digital age, the uses and gratification theory, and the spiral of silence theory as these are the areas that will best ground an understanding of social media in public schools from the perspective of school stakeholders.

Digitally Divided: The Haves from the Have-Nots

Over the past half century, income inequality has become more pronounced and problematic, as the middle-class shrinks and more people join the ranks of the working poor (Arends, 2019). Those who have financial wealth are able to raise and support their children in different ways than those struggling to provide a stable and safe life for their families. The strain and pressure to maintain a roof over one's head and food on one's table outweighs the ability to assist with math homework or ensure that one's child is able to join the soccer team after school. The effects of family finances on student achievement are well documented (Coleman, 1966; Rothstein, 2004). A seminal work on social class and students is Coleman's

1966 work that focused on educational opportunity. Coleman's study found that parental education, income, and race are all significant factors in students' achievement. His work was crucial for beginning to understand the importance of context and opportunity when it comes to educational success. Others have expanded on his initial understanding and it is now understood that parents from poor communities and those with other characteristics of low socio-economic status (SES) including a combination of education, income, and occupation factors, have the same educational goals for their children as their middle-class counterparts (Epstein, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). While this is true, it was also found that students lacking academic role models place less value in school achievement and therefore do not apply themselves as much to academic tasks, as those who have academic role models (Mayer, 1997; Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Parents with low SES are often working around the clock to provide for their families leaving little time to engage with their child's education (Ankrum, 2016).

Students growing up in homes with unstable finances are also more likely to experience stress and trauma that impact their ability to grow and develop at the same pace as their more affluent counterparts. The ways in which students who "have" positive life experiences that support school differs greatly from students who "have not." This is also true the extent and ways in which parents communicate with schools to advocate for their children. As it stands, there exists a gap in achievement between schools in affluent districts vs. schools in districts with low socio-economic resources (Rothstein, 2004). Overall, social class has a direct correlation with student test scores. Students raised in homes where one or both parents attended college have been exposed to more vocabulary words prior to the start of kindergarten than their counterparts whose parents did not attend college. Unfortunately, these initial gaps in exposure

to education become larger and long-lasting gaps in achievement as students move through school.

Another barrier to communication is that parents of low SES can be uncomfortable by teachers and principals, which deters parents from getting involved (Machen, Wilson, and Notar, 2005). Person-to-person communication represents only one way in which digital communication has changed society; the transmission of economic, cultural, and social capital has also evolved in the face of digital communication (Darvin, 2018). Those with access to technology, particularly the American middle class, have been able to easily adapt to these changes. However, people who live in communities with high levels of poverty do not have the same opportunities and access as individuals in more affluent communities (Rothstein, 2004). The complexities of this inequity extend beyond a simple matter of those who have access to technology and those who do not, and rather finds itself at the intersection of access to technology and digital literacy (Bach, Wolfson, & Crowell, 2018; Song & Owens, 2011). Digital literacy refers to the skills and knowledge required to navigate the internet and other web-based platforms. In school districts, those in areas of affluence are better able to serve and support students in learning how to use technology than districts for whom access is an issue. The lack of access limits the time districts are able to spend educating students on tools and skills they will need to find success in an increasingly digital world. In particular, students in urban or rural settings and students of color are more likely to lack access to 21st century technology both at home and at school than white-suburban students (Song & Owens, 2011). However, all students will graduate into a world where digital literacy is an essential skill. The jobs that will be available to them, will be in large part ones that rely on digital skills in order for individuals to be considered for hire. A gap in technology access and digital know-how will translate into less

eligibility for jobs and therefore limit the opportunities available to learners who are not explicitly taught to use and navigate digital spaces.

Gaps in digital literacy are already being illuminated by current digital communication practices. One study of this phenomenon revealed that there are certain methods of digital communication that the public prefers, and those preferences vary from community to community (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr 2015). In this case, Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr (2015) conducted a qualitative study across an urban school, an affluent suburban school, and a mixed income magnet school utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol. Their findings indicate that parent and administrator agreement in implementation and preference regarding school communication is crucial in maintaining a positive communication relationship. One element of ensuring that this relationship stays aligned is to consider how the population with whom you are corresponding prefers to receive their messages. For example, principals who prefer to communicate via Twitter and are adept in creating clear messages in 280 characters or less will still be ineffective in conveying their messages if their intended audiences do not use twitter as a tool to send and receive messages. At a minimum, effective communication relies on the message being received by the intended audience.

The digital divide is a term that has come to define the gap between those who have ready access to technology, particularly internet capable technology, and those who do not (van Dijk, 2006). Unsurprisingly, families with lower SES have less access to in their homes and often lack the digital literacy skills required to navigate a technology driven educational system. In this way, the digital divide exacerbates the already large achievement gap between affluent and poor school districts by adding to it this essential 21st century skill (Ritzhaupt, Liu, Dawson, & Barron, 2013). Students from affluent communities often outperform their impoverished and

urban counterparts by every standardized measure due to a variety of factors including affluent students benefiting from adequate funding, community supports, and access to necessary tools for education. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) opportunities are needed for students and the community at large when access to such tools might not exist within the home. The public library in many towns and cities has taken on this important role and given families access to technology through the provision for and maintenance of internet capable technologies, but even libraries differ in funding streams and resources.

In this way, poorer communities are still grappling with how to teach and train people for a 21st century workforce when access to these technologies are limited (Darvin, 2018). This is important because it highlights the need for all levels of educational institutions to provide technological training and experience. One's ability to effectively use technology has the potential to either narrow the achievement gap, if access to technology is distributed evenly across school districts, or to significantly widen the gap if it is only accessible to certain groups (Song & Owens, 2011).

However, it is not just the poor who struggle with staying current with technology, even when people have access to the technology required for digital communication, some still refrain from utilizing it from a fear that they lack the skills needed to use such tools properly for communication (Zieger & Tan, 2012). Zieger and Tan (2012) found that parents elected not to use unfamiliar technology, such as the online gradebook, because they were not confident in how to use it. However, they also found that parents who were utilizing the online gradebook as a means of communication were more involved with their child's education, which is important because other research suggests leads to better outcomes for student success (Grolnick, Kurowsku, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015). Zieger and

Tan also suggest that school administrators can help parents navigate unfamiliar technological advances by providing parent workshops and classes when schools add new technology to their communication plan. While these suggestions are worthwhile, they can still be unrealistic for parents who are unable to come to school to attend a workshop due to other obligations or issues with missing work, providing childcare, or finding proper transportation (Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016).

Beyond access to technology, studies indicate that the ways in which educators utilize technology varies across socio-economic status (Becker, 2001; Finneran, 2000; Song & Owens 2011). In their quantitative study, Song and Owens found that teacher training played a significant role in whether technology implementation and integration was successful in improving student outcomes. Their study utilized data from the base year Educational Longitudinal Survey of 2002-2004 (ELS:02). The ELS:02 is a national survey administered by the National Center for Educational Statistics that seeks to better understand the educational experience of high school students in the United States. The survey includes four subgroups: students, teachers, administrators, and parents. For their study, Song and Owens considered data collected from only the teacher and administrator groups, as they were particularly interested in the training that teachers receive in regard to technology use in schools, as well as teacher use of internet and technology in classroom instruction. The administrator survey was used to measure the socio-economic level of the schools involved with the survey. Through their analysis, Song and Owens found that over 80% of teachers across SES received training in the technology available in their schools. However, they also discovered that following the initial professional development opportunities, few trainings existed that offered advanced resources for technology use and integration in the classroom. Therefore, use of technological resources became quickly

outdated or even obsolete in the face of rapidly changing materials and technologies. Their study found that most teachers, over 70%, utilize technology for administrative purposes, for things like managing student grades and engaging in collegial discourse with other members of their staff. Interestingly, the data also showed that less than 20% (18.8%) of teachers used their computer as a means of communicating with parents. When considering SES, Song and Owens found that at schools with high SES, 84% reported that they received training in technology use compared with 77% at schools with low SES. The researchers advocate for ongoing and meaningful professional development committed to helping teachers learn best practices for technology integration in accordance with the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards for technology use in the classroom. In addition, they recommend that schools with low SES, particularly those in urban settings seek additional funding to facilitate a learning culture surrounding high quality technology integration and instruction.

Roles and Responsibilities of School Administrators

Communication exists on multiple levels ranging from one-way communication to multiple participant reciprocal communication. These varying levels provide people and organizations alike with decisions that must be made as to how, when, and where a message is conveyed to its intended audience. In the educational realm, one-way communication has been the primary method of delivering a message to the intended recipients. Newsletters, class schedules, and even report cards have historically been sent out in mailers that arrive at the home of the student (Epstein, 1992). Other forms of traditional communication methods such as face-to-face parent-teacher meetings have been found effective (Decker & Decker, 2003) however, such methods might be difficult for parents and teachers to devote (Rogers & Wright, 2008). The advent of technology based communication has shortened the time it takes for a message to

be sent to the audience and has also opened the door for two-way communication that is faster and more efficient than relying entirely on mail and phone (Dorman, 1998; Rogers & Wright, 2008).

Social media accounts provide individuals with immediate access and increases the variety of ways that individuals can stay informed about a large number of topics ranging from political affairs to community updates (National Schools Public Relations Association, 2014). Social media is used not only by individuals, but most organizations are now engaged with social media for transmitting information to stakeholders, and schools in the United States are no exception. Currently, administrators across the country are utilizing social media such as twitter as a means to connect daily with stakeholders (Stewart & Gat-Tisi, 2019). Twitter, a microblogging messaging service that allows users to create short posts of 140-280 characters, is one of the most popular platforms in the educational community (Dixon, 2012). Across the school community, it is the responsibility of the Board of Education, Superintendent, and building principals to keep community members and stakeholders informed about school matters. As recently as 2016, Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher's work (2016) supported that parental involvement can have a positive impact on students, families, and schools. In fact, not only have studies shown that family involvement in school can increase young children's skill in both literacy and math (Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013), but research has also shown that parents want more frequent communication from their children's school in order to better help their children succeed (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr, 2015; Im, Hughes, & West, 2016; Laho, 2019). In studying both parents and administrators perceptions of information and communication technologies Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr (2015) conducted interviews with stakeholders from "low-wealth," "mixed income," and "affluent" schools and found that when communication

between parents and administrators are aligned in terms of communication preference and availability of preferred communication, parent engagement in school-related issues increases. Communication preference varied among the stakeholders interviewed and ranged from phone calls to text messages to e-mail communication. For example, parents in the urban school expressed preference for receiving text message communication from the school district, however, texting was not a form of communication the district utilized thus creating a gap between stakeholder preference and utilized technology. The researchers stressed the importance of aligning school-home communication with stakeholder preference as well as comfort of use. Another finding of this study was that the more connected parents were to the school, specifically in connection to the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the more dissatisfied they were with the school in general. Parents who worked full-time and were less connected with the PTA were more satisfied with their child's school. This suggests that the more closely one understands the inner workings of a school district the less satisfied they are with it, put another way—ignorance adds a layer of distance that is bliss.

To learn more about parental and teacher levels of comfort and perceptions about using digital platforms to communicate with one another in a rural school district in Michigan a survey was used (Laho, 2019). The researcher was specifically interested in perceptions of Learning Management Systems (LMS), a tool that allows teachers to deliver and manage instructional content, which also gives parents an opportunity to stay current on the day-to-day happenings in the classroom as well as their child's performance within the curriculum. The study found that the teachers utilized their technology primarily for single-direction communication that is to say that they did not leave a channel open for parents to communicate back with them. The LMS platform is a bidirectional platform, meaning the opportunity exists for two-way communication,

the teachers were simply not implementing this feature. The researcher concluded that access to a communication tool does not equate to the use of that tool (Laho, 2019). Training and professional development for parents and teachers would be needed to ensure that all parties are not only aware of the tools for communication, but are also comfortable with using them to communicate. Laho further concluded that early adoption and implementation of a communication tool requires ongoing support for users as those tools are integrated into the communication system of a school.

Another study conducted by Im, Hughes, and West (2016) found that parent and friends' involvement in school during late adolescence contributed to higher academic achievement for students at the age of 15. Their study showed that parents of children in ninth grade relied on their child to report the goings on of the school day. The study further showed that at about this age, 15 years old, students decrease disclosure to their parents about their activities. These two complimentary findings show the importance of community outreach and communication on the part of school administration as a way to keep families informed about school issues. This study is unique in that participants belong to a low socio-economic status group, thus highlighting issues of communication that exist within this group. Im, Hughes, and West suggest that while parents of teens might feel that it is appropriate to reduce school involvement as their children get older, there is actually a significant benefit to parental involvement, namely that feelings of a positive school culture increase and youth feel a stronger sense of belonging within the school community.

Social media as a means of communication provides parents and community members a window into the often-closed nature of the school day (Baule & Lewis, 2012; Dixon, 2012). The work of teacher and student often exists only within the classroom; social media posts on Twitter

and Instagram allow parents to see a small slice of what their student is doing while attending school (Dixon, 2012). Thompson et al. (2015) researched the ways in which Smartphones such as the iPhone have changed the ways in which parents communicate with school. Their findings revealed that smartphones have affected how parents view academic support and that parents saw the technology of an internet capable phone as a tool to help them stay aware of and involved in the goings on of their child's academic life. Smartphones have expanded the options for parent-teacher communication, particularly in the realms of social media and more traditional internet-capable channels such as e-mail. Their work was informed by the Media Richness Theory (MRT), which focuses on how the richness of a medium or platform enables successful communication between individuals, thus this one platform becomes a preferred or selected medium for consumer use (Thompson et al., 2015).

Parents believe that in order to support their children they must have access to and understand what takes place in schools including school policies and procedures (Park & Holloway, 2013). Parents feel that it is easier to connect when their children are in elementary school finding that middle and high school do not foster the same kind of community they experienced when their children were younger, this is problematic because this is the time that academic expectations become more challenging and parents own capabilities in supporting their children change (Epstein, 2019; Park & Holloway, 2013; Moore, Bagin & Gallagher, 2016). Administrators, of all academic levels, believe that in order to foster positive parental engagement in schools, there needs to be an emphasis on open communication and healthy relationships between families and schools wherein all stakeholders share power (Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016; Moore, Bagin & Gallagher, 2016; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social networking sites provide a free option for administrators and

school personnel to distribute information and connect (Stewart & Gati-Tisi, 2019). Thus, this type of communication is not only affordable, but with billions of users utilizing apps such as Facebook a vast majority of families can be reached, provided they have access to the necessary technology.

As schools and families seek to build and strengthen relationships, it is important to consider the different ways in which schools and families engage with one another. The types of involvement schools might seek from parents might include, participation in school governance issues (perhaps through the PTO or attending local School Board meetings, volunteering to help at school in a variety of ways, and helping their child with their homework (Ames, Khoju, & Watkins, 1993). Historically, schools have communicated with parents through print sources such as letter correspondence or in-person at open house or parent-teacher conferences (Caruso Jr., 2013; Epstein, 1995).

However, in the past 20 years, communication has evolved to include instantaneous communication between school and home with the advent of personal computing and email (Dixon, 2012; Moss et. al., 2015). For example, with e-mail correspondence some other traditional modes of communication have become less prevalent including things like newsletters, flyers, and letters from administration, which have traditionally been sent through the postal system are now delivered electronically. One important study revealed suburban principals use e-mail with more frequency than other methods of communication (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr, 2015). Heath, Maghrabi, and Carr's work is important not only because it directly considers the place of digital communication in schools, but also because it provides information from the perspective of parents. Their work substantiates that principals choosing to utilize digital media, in this case email, has parental support in affluent districts. However, for

parents with lower socio-economic status (SES) connection and communication can be trickier. Park and Holloway (2013) conducted a quantitative study that analyzed whether student outcomes could be predicted by parental involvement within in a socio-demographically diverse population. They were particularly interested in parental involvement with educational expectations and college planning. Park and Holloway found that school outreach, above other methods of trying to garner parental involvement, was crucial in fostering support and communication between families and school. Their research shows that for parents of high school students when school plays an active role in providing parents from low SES with information ~~is~~ it can help support parental confidence in aiding their students. This study supports the need for school administration, particularly administrators in districts with low economical capital, to reach out to parents with support to aid communication.

One of the ways social media can support an organization is by providing insight into the public with whom the organization engages. One 2015 study from the United Kingdom (UK) sought to understand the ways in which local governments might utilize social media analytics as a way to connect with the public. With this study, Moss et. al. (2015) considered social media analytics as a way to serve four main organizational purposes: 1.) communication, 2.) public relations, 3.) customer service, and 4.) public engagement. Over a six-month period, the research team worked closely with two city councils in the UK. They identified key contacts within the municipality and organized a workshop, which introduced tools to, “identify, analyze, and visualize social media data” and explored the types of analytic results that could be produced. The aim of the workshop was to not only introduce the tools for use with social media, but to also provide the space for participants to reflect on the value of the tools. Following the workshops, participants were interviewed to consider their views regarding social media

analytics and the impact it might have on their work. One of the most interesting insights revealed through the interviews was the notion that the public might be able to co-produce policy. One participant explained that the most useful element of social media was the high engagement it brought out in the community. By paying attention to community concerns and allowing the public to provide feedback at every step of the policy process it allows for greater public support of initiatives and changes. The research team found it important to note that such analytics and opportunities for engagement are rare for organizations to utilize. This fact alone has important implications for school districts whose budgets might not allow for expensive community outreach. Most social media platforms generally do not charge businesses and organizations for their use, instead these platforms make their money from advertisements. However, the training and access to internet is not free for consumers.

School districts, similarly to local municipalities, have a responsibility to their communities to communicate as purposefully as possible by seeking to understand the ways in which community stakeholders prefer to obtain and read messages (Dixon, 2012; Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). Analytics on school owned and operated social media pages might be one such way to fulfil this duty by providing insight on what really matters to the community and creating policy and procedures accordingly (Moss et.al. 2015). Municipalities that do not communicate through channels accessed by their communities are not communicating effectively. In order for a message to be heard, it must be presented in a way that is accessible to the audience. To ensure that communication reaches the intended audience, organizations often create and implement policies governing the creation and timing of correspondence (Epstein, 2019). Such policies would provide uniformity and consistency across the school organization, which would in turn lead to higher engagement and community support (Moss et al. 2015). For

example, when the high school uses the same social media norms that have been used in the earlier school grade levels there is an increased likelihood that parents will continue to engage, as it is easy and familiar.

Communication in the Digital Age

Parental involvement and support in school has been shown to increase positive outcomes for students, which include increased attendance, higher rates of proficiency in literacy and mathematics, as well as positive feelings of connectedness and social well-being in school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon & Fonseca, 2015). An early study conducted by Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey (2000) sought to understand whether providing resources for involvement and making them available to the mother might lead to a more positive transition to junior high for students. Participants in this study included children, their mothers, and their teachers. The researchers were interested in three specific types of involvement: school, cognitive, and personal. They defined school involvement as parental participation in school events and activities, cognitive involvement as exposing one's child to intellectually stimulating activities such as going to the library or museums, and personal involvement as being aware of what is going on in one's child's life (2000). The researchers focused on the potential "buffering" effect parents might have on protecting their children from the negativity often associated with the transition to junior high. The participants for this mixed-methods study were drawn from a larger 3-year study that included 209 children; the researchers sought out the 60 students who were making their transition from sixth to seventh grade. Once the participant sample of children, mothers, and teachers were identified, the team conducted interviews and administered questionnaires to the participants. The goal was to better understand the ways in which mothers were involved with

their child's education as well as what, if any, impact that involvement had on student outcomes. Other data collected included student report cards, with grades for literacy and math of particular interest. Among Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, and Hevey's findings was the fact that mothers generally decrease their involvement in their child's life as the child transitions to junior high. They concluded that this occurred for a variety of reasons, including the desire for their child to be more independent in all areas under study: school, cognitive, and personal. However, children whose mothers increased cognitive and personal involvement by staying abreast of what is going on in a child's life, had children whose academic outcomes in math and literacy were more successful. The researchers pointed to parent resources as one possible reason for this increase. Their work suggests that if a mother is involved in all aspects of their children's school life, the more successful that child will be. Communication between school and home is a key element in ensuring that a parent will continue to be involved with their child's academic endeavors. Parents of students at the middle and high school level are releasing control and independence to their children, so schools need to reach out to parents in order to capitalize on the benefits that parental involvement can have on outcomes for students (2000).

Communication tools are rapidly evolving, particularly with regard to the 24-hour news cycle, which continues to affect the way in which people obtain news and information and presents a challenge as organizations try to effectively keep up with communication (Baule & Lewis, 2012). The pervasiveness of social media connection is almost unimaginable with over 2 billion people actively using Facebook (www.facebook.com) and with more than 67 million people who have accounts on Twitter (www.twitter.com). These interactive sites are growing rapidly and, changing the communications landscape in modern society (Baule & Lewis, 2012). Furthermore, socially mediated communication techniques provide the opportunity for instant

communication between people, thus eliminating the time it takes for a message to be received (Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). Given that at any moment, a large percentage of the population is engaged with social media as a means of communication and connectedness this indicates that social media is impacting the very way messaging is distributed and perceived by the public.

Social media emphasizes the human desire to connect with others, by providing platforms to individuals to share personal information across a wide audience (Meraz, 2009). The popularity of social media has led local governments and organizations, particularly in the professional sector, to utilize web-based communication tools as their primary means of communication, including as a source of news and information, and often, to gain competitive advantage in the business realm (Dasli, 2019; Kim, 2016; Valos et al. 2017). Oft utilized platforms in the social media realm rely on user-generated and exchanged content (Valos et al. 2017). Social media has thus introduced an opportunity for the general public to create and distribute content for public consumption, which has in some ways taken some of the power from the news media and other sources who once held all of the communication power (Meraz, 2009). The changing power dynamics combined with the fact that the use of social media is almost entirely free, makes it a cost-efficient and desirable substitute to more traditional alternatives such as newspaper advertising and other print messaging (Dasli, 2019; Valos et al. 2017).

Integrating social media opportunities into already existing organizational structures and policies requires internal expertise to effectively leverage the potential of social media for communication support (Braojos-Gomez et al., 2015). The implementation of new and rapidly evolving forms of communication can be overwhelming in terms of complexity (Keller, 2016).

Valos et al. (2017) conducted a three-phase study where phases one and two included interviewing practitioners engaged in developing a social media capable integrated marketing communication system. From these interviews, the researchers identified themes and relationships before moving into phase three in which they evaluated the utility of the model. One key finding of the study was that a challenge to implementing social media within an integrated marketing model was a lack of adequate resource allocation. Respondents identified limited support from senior leadership, particularly leadership that did not perceive a strong return on investment from social media methods of communication, as a barrier to success in creating a model for utilizing social media. Another finding suggests that the rapid evolution of social media tools, “resulted in organizations appearing to lack strategic focus, making only tactical choices within SM planning.” While these findings show the barriers to implementations, other valuable findings of this study show the strengths that social media communication can provide. Among these strengths are reach and engagement. Participants shared that spreading a message widely was vastly supported by used of social media and social networks. For essentially no cost to the organization, a message could reach its intended and extended audience with great speed.

In the political arena, Kim (2016) found that Facebook users often turned to their newsfeed to gain information about political candidates and policies. This study revealed that Facebook users often are only exposed to political information presented by like-minded peers. When a user arrives at his or her own newsfeed they are coming to page that has been carefully tailored to their own personal beliefs and opinions. They have sought out and turned to people whose views match their own; they “like,” “share,” and “comment” on articles that have a viewpoint they support. Each like, share, and comment results in Facebook presenting other

articles and content with which the user is likely to like, share, or comment. Kim's research revealed that an implication of this on political participation was that users were only selectively exposed to political content, which overwhelmingly supported their position. Kim surmised that feelings of support for one's political ideology online in turn leads to greater political engagement offline. Kim's work is relevant for this study because it highlights the ways that virtual action can lead to increased physical engagement.

One of the many challenges school districts face is keeping up with the latest advancements in technology. Social media applications (apps) are among the most popular of these advancements particularly applications like Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012). With so many available apps and new ones being created daily it can be difficult for school district administrators to create and apply policies that can encompass the nuance that comes with a particular application. Educational leaders must therefore decide which applications and platforms they will engage with and determine what policies, practices, and procedures will govern how social media will be utilized in their schools (Stewart & Gati-Tisi, 2019; Stewart & Johnson, 2013). While school districts are able to maintain a level of control over the way messages are shared with the community through careful planning, there is no way to control how messages are perceived and discussed by the community at large, especially through the personal social media accounts of stakeholders (Dixon, 2012).

Uses and Gratification Theory

In the 1960's and 70's, when television and radio were still the dominant forms of media for social satisfaction, researchers Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) began studying and analyzing the ways in which the general population utilized media for personal use. The results

of their work became known as the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that audiences engage with different types of media in complex ways to meet their needs. According to their findings, there are a variety of circumstances that lead audience to seek mass media as a way to satisfy certain needs including social, political, and creative connections among others (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Additional research on this area, suggests that each medium of media provides a unique combination of stimuli thereby serving a specific purpose, which the audience seeks out knowingly in order to obtain different gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974). For example, individuals seeking to fill a need of civic participation might seek out the news; while individuals seeking to fill a recreational or creative need might utilize a camera for photography (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Thus, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch purport that to better understand the impact of mass media on the public, one must first consider which needs individuals are seeking to satisfy (1973). This seems to hold true for social media as well. Social media use can be grounded in emotions. When users are happy, sad, or angry, they might reach out through social networks in order to find like-minded people who share in that emotion (Dasli, 2019).

Spiral of Silence Theory

Another important theory to consider is the spiral of silence theory. Individuals engaging with information through social media do so through carefully curated personal blogs of their own creation (Kim, 2016). The Spiral of Silence Theory was first proposed by scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974. The name of the theory refers to the tendency of people to remain silent when they feel their viewpoint is in the minority to the opposite majority views on a subject. The theory speculates that fear of isolation and fear of reprisal are the two key factors in a person's decision to remain silent. In short, people fear being ostracized or other

consequence (such as losing a job or losing friends) as a result of being up front with personal opinions regarded as contrary to the norm (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Conversely, the closer individuals feel that their opinion is held by the majority, the more likely they are to express that opinion. The spiral of silence theory can help inform the ways in which people engage with social media as affirmation of their beliefs and opinions.

A study conducted by Porten-Chee and Eidlars (2015) sought to understand how the spiral of silence theory might hold true with online communication. They conducted an online diary study of media exposure to the climate change debate in Germany. Participants were recruited by the researchers following the screening of online Facebook groups and blogs. Respondents who agreed to participate were then invited to take part in the online diary study for 7 days in which their exposure to climate change related content was mapped. The researchers accounted for exposure to blog posts, social media content, well-known news-media television programs, newspapers, and magazines by asking participants a series of open-ended questions aimed at further pin-pointing their exposure to climate-change related content. The researchers predicted that respondents whose views were in the minority on the climate change debate would be less willing to speak about their views in public when presented with news and other media content discussing information that opposed their beliefs, as suggested by the spiral of silence theory. However, their findings revealed the opposite to be true: participants whose views were in the minority of the debate were even more willing to speak out about their views publicly than those whose views were held by the majority of people. The researchers explained that one possible reason for the dissonance could be that in the climate debate participants did not feel fear over being publicly isolated or ostracized because of their views. They suggest that perceived social consequences might have changed participants comfort level in sharing their

views about climate change publicly. The more they saw about climate change, the more compelled they felt to act.

In summary, chapter two has considered the areas of the digital divide, roles and responsibilities of school administrators, communication in the digital age, and both the uses and gratification and spiral of silence theories. These were important to ground the research that was conducted as they create a shared corpus for creating instruments for data collection and approaching the data for analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative case study was used to understand the perceptions of stakeholders including parents, administrators, and Board of Education members who utilize social media within one school district in Connecticut. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) define a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 28). For the purposes of this study one district that which social media as a means of communication was selected; the district represents the case. This case was purposefully selected by to answer the research questions (Stake, 2005). The school district represents one suburban school district in Connecticut. The Highlander School District (pseudonym) is considered one case, with each participant interview serving as an individual data point. To represent the perspectives of the three different stakeholder groups, interviews were conducted with individuals from each stakeholder group, which were used in conjunction with data from social media and district documents. Of particular interest were the perceptions of stakeholders about social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter and the ways these interact with school district policy, both formally and informally. This case was purposefully selected in that there is active social media communication between stakeholders within the selected School District, which will maximize what can be learned by studying the school district as the case (Stake, 1995).

In order to better understand the connection between social media and school district stakeholders, this qualitative case study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What can be understood about social media and school districts from the perspectives of school district stakeholders?
2. What types of policies do school districts formally and informally adopt regarding social media?

3. What types of practices do school districts formally and informally engage in regarding social media?
4. How does social media influence school district administrators, both formally and informally?
5. What topics and areas of interest do parents engage in to communicate with and about the school district through social media?

Study Context

This study was conducted in Connecticut, a state in the North East of the United States. Connecticut has small to mid-sized cities, coastal areas, suburban, and rural towns. In 2019, there were 170 public school districts in the State-of Connecticut. Connecticut is unique in that it has not only more standard forms of school choice (i.e. magnet and private schools), but it also has a large number of boarding schools across the state, which are private, highly selective, and draw students from within and out of state. The State Department of Education oversees education in all of its' manifestations across the state. Connecticut has many school districts comprised of more than one municipality. The school district under study, Highlander School District (pseudonym), is made up of two towns, Greenville, and Mapleton (pseudonyms), each with their own government, unique community feel, and resources. As is consistent with qualitative research, a school district that utilizes the phenomenon of social media was selected based on the propensity of community based social media pages along with officially sanctioned social media practices on the part of School District.

Of the two towns that make-up Highlander School District, Greenville is the larger with a population of nearly 20,000 people. It has a commercial main street that features amenities that include a movie theater, restaurants, shopping centers, medical offices, and a biking path. The

local Parks and Recreation office hosts frequent community events, especially those that cater to school-aged families. Greenville also has a well-funded and utilized public library that is one of the points of pride for community members. Greenville is home to two elementary schools and one middle school; it is also home to the region's only high school. The median household income in Greenville is approximately \$77,000. The racial makeup of the town was 97% White, with African American less than 1% and Hispanic or Latino persons of any race made up close to 2% of the population according to the 2010 Census. Something unique about Greenville is that approximately 30% of Greenville's population are over 60 years of age.

In contrast, Mapleton, a town of about 8,000 people, is much smaller than its neighbor, Greenville. Its main street features several restaurants, but it has a much less commercial feel than its neighbor. Mapleton differs from Greenville in that Mapleton has several recreational options that make it a draw in the spring and summer. Additionally, Mapleton has two elementary schools and a middle school; students who live in Mapleton attend Highlander High School in Greenville. Along with the public-school options in Mapleton, there is also a private boarding school. In Mapleton, the median household income is approximately \$95,000, which has been increasing since the early 2000's (ct.gov). The racial makeup of the town is 91.4% White, while Asian is almost 4%, Hispanic is almost 3%, and African Americans are less than 1%.

The Highlander school district. Highlander School District is governed by a Board of Education, a locally elected group of members who governs the school district. In Highlander School District, Board of Education Members represent each of the two towns, so that local oversight is provided from each municipality, Greenville, and Mapleton. The Region is officially run by the Superintendent, who is hired by the Board of Education, and who presides

over the region's four elementary schools, two middle schools, and the high school. The region benefits from the homogeneity of the population and relatively high socio-economic status.

Schools in the Highlander school district. Specifically, this study focused on the two middle schools and the high school in Highlander School District because the Parent Page for the Region on Facebook seems to be most active at these two educational levels. Both Greenville and Mapleton each have their own middle school that provides education for students in grade 6-8. Greenville Middle School (GMS) serves a population of approximately 500 students and Mapleton Middle School (MMS) serves a population of approximately 450 students. In total, Highlander High School (HHS) serves a population of approximately 1200 students in grades 9-12 and who come from both towns.

Each school maintains an individual Twitter account and there is an official Facebook Account overseen by the Region, which results in 4 official social media accounts under study. There are also several unofficial Facebook accounts that are run by-parents of students in the region. The majority of these are Private Facebook Groups—an “invitation only” Facebook group whose members consist only of users approved by group administrators—that allow district parents to communicate with one another about school related matters. One of these is Parents of Highlander, which participants referred to in interviews and data was collected from and analyzed.

Participants. Highlander School District Participants (Table 1) were selected based on their district role. Community member participants were selected based on their interactions on the Facebook Parent Page and through snowball sampling (Babbie, 2016). In all five community members were interviewed. After receiving permission to interview from the Superintendent of Schools, all district level administrators and administrators at the middle and high school level

were invited to participate via e-mail invitation. Additionally, the Board of Education plays an important role as the official body that approves policies and were also contacted through email and included for the important role that they play in the community. For analysis purposes, the groups school administration and Board of Education were combined in a group called “school district stakeholders”, which included seven participants. Collectively, these participants represented each major stakeholder group for the district particularly concerned with district-parent communication.

Table 1

Participants from Groups for Interviews

Pseudonym	Stakeholder Roles
Ann	Community Member
Mira	Community Member
Eloise	Community Member
Greta	Community Member
Elizabeth	Community Member
Clara	School District Stakeholder
Lea	School District Stakeholder
Anthony	School District Stakeholder
Priscilla	School District Stakeholder
Elliot	School District Stakeholder
Florence	School District Stakeholder
Everly	School District Stakeholder

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the skill and knowledge of the researcher are instrumental for the strength of the data collection and data analysis. A well-designed and implemented study makes all of the difference in terms of having meaningful findings and results (Barbour, 2008; Saldaña, 2015). In the case of this qualitative study, my research experiences prior to designing my dissertation include being trained through the Instructional Leadership program at Western Connecticut State University, where I am a doctoral student. Additionally, I have worked on several national and international conference presentations based on research projects where I served as a research assistant, under the advisement of the same researcher who serves as the chair for this dissertation. Recently, I was also a member of a research team that presented an auto-ethnographic, qualitative study on women who chose to work collaboratively to provide professional development on mindfulness and gratitude practice in education at the New England Education Research Organization Conference (NEERO). Lastly, my expertise for the topic under study was enhanced by co-authoring a book chapter on social media and educational leaders.

Along with grounding myself in the extensive literature available on qualitative methodology, I have also sought out opportunities to achieve praxis by using them as a researcher, before this important juncture with my dissertation. In keeping with current best practices of qualitative research, access to the research site was gained by seeking permission to conduct the study from the superintendent of schools prior to data collection. In addition to site access, individual participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) and pseudonyms have been used to assure confidentiality and anonymity for the school district and interview participants.

Data Collection

In a qualitative study data can be collected from a variety of sources including primary and existing data, including through digital and first-person sources. The data collected represent the lived experiences of the people whose story is being told through the research (Stake, 1995). These data can provide insight into the complex real experiences of people within an authentic setting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data collected for this study included narratives captured through interviews and found digitally through online sources to answer the research questions that informed this study (Table 2).

The primary sources of data for this case study were participant interviews, existing data from social media and web-based newspaper articles, and the researcher journal. This qualitative case study was organized around the issue of social media interactions within and about school districts. Since the focus was on understanding the ways that stakeholders and school leaders interact with social media and the ways that this reinforces and changes communication it was important to understand the perspectives of various stakeholders.

Parent, administrator, and board of education interviews. Interviews are important in qualitative research as a way to tell the stories of participants (Seidman, 2013). The purpose is not to evaluate or test a hypothesis, but rather to convey the “lived” experience of individuals (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), interview data were collected utilizing three separate semi-structured interview protocols. A specific semi-structured interview protocol was designed for each stakeholder group— school administrators (Appendix B), Board of Education members (Appendix C), and community members who participate in social media posts about the school district identified as “community members” for ease of use throughout this study (Appendix D). The goal of these open-ended

Table 2

Research Questions with Data Sources

	Administrator Interviews	Board of Education Interviews	Community Member Interviews	Existing Data (Social Media & Web-based Newspapers)	Reflexive Journal
R.Q. 1: What can be understood about social media and school districts from the perspectives of school district stakeholders?	X	X	X	X	X
R.Q. 2: What types of policies do school districts formally and informally adopt regarding social media?	X	X			X
R.Q. 3: What types of practices do school districts formally and informally engage in regarding social media?	X	X			X
R.Q. 4: In what ways does social media influence school district administrators, both formally and informally?	X	X	X	X	X
R.Q. 5: What topics and areas of interest do parents engage in to communicate with and about the school district through social media?			X	X	X

interview questions was to garner the understanding and perspectives of key community and district stakeholders regarding social media. As is common, the interview protocols started with demographic and background questions to ease participants into the interviewing. Next a range of more specific questions that asked about topics related to communication, use of technology, levels of use with social media, and comfort levels with social media followed. In this way, a full range of identified stakeholders were able to share their perspectives on information about their school, community, and social media. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and took approximately 30-45 minutes. These interviews were digitally recorded for transcription to aide with data analysis. Immediately, after each interview, time was taken to write additional notes

and appropriate researcher reflections were written into the researcher reflective journal. For analysis purposes groups were combined into two categories: school stakeholders and community members for discussion of themes and findings. Additional data was collected from social media platforms based on their connection with the Highlander School District.

Existing social media data. To understand the ways in which stakeholders engage with social media, an analysis of social media was completed. Social media data for this study included reviewing the postings and comments section of the Highlander School District's social media sites including the school Twitter and Facebook accounts. The agreed upon parameters for this study were the 2017-2018 calendar years. Comments and postings relevant to the study were screen captured for ease of coding and keeping them in line with interview transcripts. These platforms and their associated commenting platforms have no assumption of privacy as they exist on the internet in the public domain (Mund, 2017). As a form of data, these comments provide insight on the authentic lived experiences of stakeholders who utilize social media as a means of communicating about school-related topics. Additionally, parents in the Highlander School District have created a Facebook group that hosts ongoing discussions about school related issues. Parents who are members of this group can share their questions and opinions as comments. When participants suggested specific social media posts and comments they had personally made on Facebook groups germane to the study those data were sought and captured for ease of coding. In this way, the data for this study include specific posts and comments on Facebook parent pages created by participants who referenced and suggested them as data and school district Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Web-Published newspaper articles and comments section. Any articles about Highlander School District published on the web served as another data point. Specific

publications that were utilized include Speaking Out (pseudonym) for a regional newspaper and the Republic-American Newspaper. These articles provide further understanding about the ways in which the community engages with and discusses school related issues. Each article and individual comment were treated as a unique data point and, pseudonyms were created for each person's comments, to ensure anonymity.

Reflexive journal. In qualitative research, the researcher must acknowledge the potential for certain values and biases, some of which might have ignited an interest in a topic or study. Utilizing a reflective journal can help facilitate self-reflection and examine personal beliefs as they emerge (Ortlipp, 2008). Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommend reflexive notetaking as a way for the researcher to catalogue and take detailed entries in reference to the study and the researcher's own values. As already mentioned, the reflexive journal was used immediately following each interview ~~and~~ to keep track of on-going notes, ideas, and details about the theoretical framework. Additionally, these detailed notes were also recorded throughout the entire dissertation process, from the beginning of the dissertation proposal process to data collection, data analysis, and writing of the findings, and conclusion chapters of the dissertation. These notes were both descriptive and analytical. They served to help me deeply interrogate the data as well as my own thoughts.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research relies heavily on the collection of rich data (Geertz, 1973) and a thorough, systematic analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data in this study were analyzed using a constant comparative method. This is a process by which the data are broken down into individual "units" (Linclon & Guba, 1985) and coded into categories (Table 3). The anticipated codes were ones that came from an understanding of the theoretical framework and were the

starting place for coding (Bazeley, 2007; Saldana, 2015). As the coding took place additional codes emerged in vivo from the data and were systematically added through the analysis process. These categories emerged from the data as the researcher determined which pieces seemed to “go together” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Once sorted into categories, these data were coded. The codes that arose from this process stemmed from two primary places. The first type of codes were created from patterns that emerged across participant responses in order to better understand their worldview; the second type of codes emerged and led to themes the researcher determined to be significant to the focus of the study and which ultimately aided in the development of theoretical insights into the concepts under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the constant comparative method stage of coding, the researcher considered categories for the data that were both descriptive and explanatory thereby encouraging a deeper understanding of the relationships between and amongst the categories (Boeije, 2002).

Additionally, the analysis of the various data points provided a source of triangulation, which serves to corroborate findings from different sources (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Triangulation helps reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation of any one data theme by accessing multiple viewpoints and data sources to clarify meaning (Stake, 2005).

Interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis. Data analysis for interviews took place in three parts. First, the researcher read each transcript individually, utilizing an inductive coding method wherein the ideas, concepts and themes emerged from the data (Schools, 2012). Data was highlighted and coded with a short phrase describing each piece of interview text in a line by line analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). After all transcripts were read and preliminary codes made, the researcher read each transcript again.

Table 3

Data Analysis: Anticipated and Emergent Codes

Anticipated Codes	Emergent Codes
Web-based communication formal	Women engaging with social media
Web-based communication informal	Informally venting on social media
Traditional vs. nontraditional	Increased transparency
Administrative decision making	Positive user experience
Users raising concerns online	Seeking formal support
One-way communication	Seeking informal support
Two-way communication	Appropriate channels of communication
	Communication expectations transparent
	Communication expectations timely

At this stage of analysis, the emphasis was on looking for patterns across the data and sorting relevant passages into categories took place (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This process is called open coding; the purpose of this phase in analysis is to collapse similar codes into one category and to remove redundant or superfluous codes (Schools, 2012). The researcher checked the new codes against the original data to ensure that the codes captured the essence of the data, a method called the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finally, the researcher sought connections between the experiences of the participants by considering the themes that emerged from the categories that arose in the analysis process (Seidman, 2013). This process is sometimes referred to as closed coding where the codes are narrowed down to a few overarching codes or larger themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña,

2014). The ideas that emerged from this process informed the findings of the study as they relate to the research questions, and in particular revealed overarching relationships and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which are written about in detail in chapter four of this dissertation. For analysis and discussion purposes, individual quotes in Chapter 4 emerged from the interviews, other forms of data are specified where appropriate.

Existing social media and web-published newspaper articles. Data analysis for the existing social media posts (included posts with visuals such as graphics and pictures) and web-published newspaper articles was similar to the methods used for analyzing the interviews. The articles and primary sources, with or without the comments sections, were treated as a transcript and coded first descriptively and then sorted into categories as patterns emerge. After the first two rounds of coding were complete, the data collected from both the interviews, social media posts, and web-published newspaper articles were analyzed together in order to better understand the connections between each phenomenon or lived experience and to further develop compelling conclusions.

Reflexive journal. The researcher journal was utilized throughout the data collection and data analysis portions of the study. It was used to triangulate data and to serve as a sounding board for the researcher. It was also the space where the researcher wrote questions and thoughts to share with my dissertation chair. The data that were written in the journal during the collection phase were systematically analyzed and coded as deemed appropriate by me.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in that the cases selected represent a somewhat affluent, racially homogeneous school district in the State of Connecticut. The gaps between rural, small town, suburban, and urban districts in the state in terms of access to technology and resources is well-

documented, but beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, further study in other types of school districts may yield different findings. Additionally, that the Highlander School District acknowledges a need to improve communication may also mean that other districts that believe they excel at communication could also be rich sources for further study. Social class is another area that might be of a new focus on the ways in which less affluent areas and those with limited access to technology experience social media in their districts and communities. Further, this study encompassed just one unique year where a longitudinal study might increase diversity of findings. Lastly, the single site location as part of an exploratory study is fitting for this work, but presents a limitation. Future studies should build on this work with multiple site locations.

Dissertation Timeline

This study with a focus on home-school communication in a digital age took place from the Fall 2018 with an end date of Spring 2020 (Table 4). A unique aspect of this study required obtaining existing data from the Facebook parent group pages when invited to do so by participants, which extended the data analysis timeframe as it increased the amount of data present. Overall, the activities for the dissertation took place based on the following timeline.

Table 4

Dissertation and IRB Timeline

Fall/Winter 2018	Completed the dissertation proposal defense and were submitted to Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval.
Spring 2019	Identified participants and emailed to schedule interviews. Interviews were conducted. Data from social media and web-based sources were also collected during this time. Chapter 3 was revised.
Summer 2019	Interviews were transcribed and prepared for coding and analysis. Chapter 2 was revised.
Fall/ Winter 2019/ Spring 2020	The data were coded and analyzed, which informed Chapter 4: Results.
Spring 2020	Dissertation Defense

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand the perceptions of stakeholders in one school district that has students from two communities about the ways in which social media is manifest as a part of school-home communication. The research that was completed is represented in this results chapter of my dissertation. Specifically, the larger themes of the Value That Stakeholders Placed on Traditional Communication, Digital Communication that is Accessible, that Digital Communication Increases Expectations and Risks, Official Communication and Social Media, Social Media as a Community Good, Inconsistent Social Media across the District, and Widely Held Differing View on Highlander School District's Website. Each of these themes is explored and many have sub-themes that also illuminate an understanding of the data from which recommendations are made in Chapter 5. Positive communication between home and school is important as it has the power to positively impact student achievement and students' sense of belonging. Therefore, school districts have a vested interest in creating communication policies that foster meaningful relationships with community members and supports the work being done by all educators.

Communication runs a broad spectrum of purpose and function. In any company or organization there exists a need to communicate for a variety of purposes. Some need to describe services offered, while others need to build, grow, and strengthen relationships whether internal or external to an organization. Some forms of communication educate, while still other types celebrate accomplishments or milestones. School districts, as a public entity funded by taxpayers in a town or municipality, have a unique need for communication with stakeholders and community members. School district communication is one way of assuring the public that their money is being well spent and that students are receiving quality instruction that prepares

students for the future and relative to the needs and desires of the public. Findings from this qualitative study showed that the Highlander School District is utilizing communication for the purposes of keeping parents and community member informed of school related news, educating the public on key school issues, and engaging the community in school content. The district also has a desire to create positive relationships with the community and to provide clear, purposeful communication to the public. This study found that the district utilizes many methods of communication ranging from printed newsletters to district managed Social Media accounts (especially Twitter and Facebook). Each type of communication method serves a unique purpose in achieving the districts' goals, with stakeholders, including administrators expressing mixed feelings regarding the emerging role of social media communication as part of a previously established communication plans in the district.

Value of Traditional Communication

Though it has been widely used for nearly a decade, social media as a tool for official communication is still considered relatively new. To better understand the role that social media played in school district communication, all participants were asked questions about the types of communication they engage with and prefer. These questions made it clear that school stakeholders felt more comfortable using traditional methods of communication. While traditional communication emerged as the preference of many school stakeholders, stakeholders from both the community and the school district spoke of the valuing traditional forms of communication and traditional communication practices. In the Highlander School District, traditional communication includes phone calls, newsletters, and e-mail correspondence where the emphasis is on messaging that is personal, almost intimate. One type of traditional communication Highlander School District had in the district plan included open houses

meetings for parents to become acquainted with the schools. An open house is when parents are invited to come to school to meet the teachers and hear about the curriculum offered; it is an opportunity for school staff to introduce themselves to parents and establish a face-to-face relationship. This type of event is popular in school districts and has been a common method of communicating curriculum to parents as their child embarks on each new school year.

I mean, I guess one of the, still, one of the most effective ways that I really talked about is the old school, getting parents here. So, we have a literacy night that we try to get parents for, we have a fifth to sixth grade orientation, we have you know, before we take our eighth graders to DC, we bring all the parents in, so I failed to mention the most fundamental, you know, open house night, parent conferences, so I think it's important not to replace the face-to-face with technology. (Everly)

Everly classified in-person communication as “old school” implying that there is a newer, more modern approach to communication to be explored and added to existing structures. She and others interviewed viewed social media as part of the evolution of school-home communication, even when they did not want it to be a replacement. Participants maintained the importance of blending traditional methods of communication with more modern web-based/digital forms.

For open house meetings, we have like a back to school bash, where it's more informal. But we'll have, you know, two opportunities for the open house for different grade levels, one for sixth grade and one for seventh and eighth grade. And then we have another one for the transition the kids that come in from fifth to sixth grade. (Everly)

When thinking about communication generally, both school stakeholders and community members brought up those times when one-to-one communication between parent and teacher or parent and administrator was necessary. This is a very different kind of communication than the types of mass messaging that e-mail, social media, or even large-scale mailings can provide to all school district members. Priscilla, a school stakeholder, considered the bulk of her communication with parents to be more personal in nature.

In my role, a lot of my communication with parents is personal. So, I usually am doing a lot of phone calls, whether there was something that happened during the day so, a lot of my communication is personal. Because I a big part of my role is kind of dealing with kids' issues. And what I say issues, it's anything from a discipline problem to a kid [who] came to me with a concern. (Priscilla)

Personal methods of communication such as a phone call are the most appropriate when the nature of the correspondence is confidential. Both community members and school stakeholders agreed that when possible, this method of personal communicating directly between home and school was most effective in helping to support a child academically or emotionally by fostering a strong school-home partnership on that individual level. One reason for this is that social media does not provide the kind of privacy and personal touch that comes with person-to-person communication. Yet, when the goal of communication is for a message to reach as many people as possible, social media and other web-based communication can serve to supplement and enhance traditional methods of communication. Increasingly, web-based communication tools are being utilized as a way to extend the reach of a message. In the Highlander School

District, mass e-mails, automated phone calls, and social media groups served as one way to support more traditional methods such as mailers and personal contact.

So that, that, that's another thing that is difficult. So, one thing we've been talking about is a newsletter that goes in backpacks. So, it's, it's happened a couple times this year, where a message from central office will go into backpacks and go home. And as a PTO member, I know that that's the most effective way to reach people. Like, it's horrible for the environment, and you're killing a lot of trees to do it. But it's still not everybody's on social media and not everybody reads a newspaper. And you know, there are some people who exclusively communicate through text message. And if you're not text messaging them, then you're not talking to them. (Lea)

Lea holds one perception about how people communicate currently, namely that not everyone has embraced social media and web-based communication, so the traditional methods of communication are still the most effective ways to reach people. Social media is therefore seen as more of an add on to an existing communication plan, rather than an entirely separate and nuanced platform of its own. With that said, Lea also raised the point that if one is not communicating via platforms preferred by the receiver of the message, then one cannot guarantee one's message is being read by the intended audience. Research supports Lea's observation, especially the notion that asking stakeholders how they prefer to receive messages makes it more likely that the message will be received (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr, 2015).

Facebook, in particular, was developed in 2004 and became widely available to users in 2009, as a social media platform that allows posting of public messages, events, pages to follow and even individual private messaging. For nearly a decade people have been using this platform to

connect and communicate. While there is still some newness to add-on features and uses of this platform, it has been widely assimilated into communication culture over the past ten years. It is not an option for organizations and school districts to ignore social media outright, or even to treat it as an afterthought. Therefore, a carefully thought out plan is needed to incorporate social media communication into communication policy.

School stakeholders in the Highlander School District seemed to be aware of the need for an explicit social media policy and mentioned some of the ways they felt social media could support and enhance communication in the district. For example, some suggested that social media could be utilized to broadcast district meetings and events, others suggested that social media provides an opportunity to pose questions to community members and quickly field responses. However, underneath the acknowledgement of social media's potential was a greater level of fear of shifting too far from methods of communication that are traditional and with which administrators feel most comfortable.

Need to Improve Community Relations

In recent years, poor communication on the part of the Highlander School District was acknowledged to have negatively impacted its relationship with stakeholders and has, in some ways, eroded the public trust. Specifically, the previous administration was criticized for their lack of transparency and a lack of communication. There was conflict between school administrators and community members regarding several issues including communication, which resulted in some turnover at the highest levels of district leadership. As a result, a new superintendent and several new administrators at the middle and high school level were hired. In the midst of the transition, the town of Greenville, including the Board of Selectmen, conducted

a survey of residents. Of particular interest were the number of residents who cited the school system as one of the factors that brought them to live in the district.

[The Board of Selectmen] did a survey last year, I think as part of their strategic planning process. 51% of people said that education was the primary reason they moved to town. And [for] 70% of the people, it was in the top two. (Elliot)

School plays an important role for the residents of Greenville and Mapleton. Stakeholders in this district, take pride in their schools and have a desire for their children to receive a good education. However, the history of poor communication resulted in dissatisfaction with the system as a whole. The new administrative staff, including those newly hired to the superintendent's office (including the Superintendent) found themselves charged with improving communication between school and home as one way to restore public faith in the school system as a whole.

And so, when I got here, one of the challenges was that the relationship between the school and town was not as positive and as collaborative as many people wanted. And so, we [central office administration} made an effort to be more involved. (Elliot)

This study found that the new administration took different steps to engage the public than the previous school district administration. The superintendent and supporting central office staff members determined that creating a more responsive communication system is one concrete step they would like to take in repairing community relations.

Desire to Communicate Effectively

School stakeholders in Highlander School District expressed a desire for their messaging to reach community members efficiently and effectively. They wanted to utilize any communication method necessary so that their content could find its way to all the stakeholders whom they serve. With so many options and platforms, both traditional and untraditional, to choose from, some participants expressed doubt over which methods were the most effective or useful.

It's just hard to know, whether your message is reaching the people it needs to at any given time..., You can, because you can feel like you're doing everything you can, [you] feel like you're having this public meeting that's in the newspaper that you've put everything on the website, yet there was a notice to your social media accounts [suggesting that people do not know what is going on]. (Lea)

School stakeholders in Highlander School District cared about the population that they served and took their responsibility to communicate seriously. In the quote from Lea, a school stakeholder, she referenced wanting to see public engagement in the form of attendance at Board of Education meetings. She and other school stakeholders had attempted to increase attendance by advertising through multiple methods of communication. She expressed that it frustrated her when she saw a light crowd attending a Board of Education meeting given the important role they played in sharing information and providing a forum for public input. This showed that there was a district desire to communicate in a way that gave voice to as many community members as possible, but that it was also viewed as a missed opportunity. The current administration was trying to re-engage a disengaged community based on the actions of those

who came before them. Attendance at Board of Education and Parent Teacher Organization meetings are examples of the in-person traditional communication through which Highlander School District measures successful communication. The communication plan served to invite community members to these in-person events as a way to share important information first-hand. The district valued in-person contact to the extent that they had recently added another in-person events to share information: school budget roll-out meetings.

Of course, you do have to hit all modalities. And you need to make sure you're compliant to meet anyone with a disability to make sure. You know, that was another big reason why we're moving to a different website. This new web platform will have built in catches for ADA compliance, to [provide] contrast visibly, [for] anyone who has a visual impairment [and also] makes sure that an e-reader can read it if you're hearing impaired.

(Florence)

Florence, and other school stakeholders, are purposeful in their selections of communication methods. There is an awareness that members of the community have diverse needs and that those needs are not being met by the current communication platforms available in the district. With her description, Florence recognizes the limitations of the current website and is an active participant in making changes to better serve the community through advancements in technology. District decisions on communication are made from a place of compassion and a desire for inclusion.

I think that we do newspaper articles, like we reach out to newspapers, with information. And the superintendent was just saying last night that he met with an organization to, like a get to know you, and how can you be involved

with Highlander School District, so it's that kind of community outreach.

And you know, every once in a while, like an organization will come up to me to ask 'come let us know about what's going on with the [different school organizations]. So, there's that kind of back and forth too,

I guess. (Lea)

Administrators communicate with the public for a variety of reasons ranging from student discipline to weather-related cancellations to school lunch options. There were a wide-range of communication options available in Highlander School District, and it was up to each administrator to determine which method was best. For weather-related correspondence, all administrators interviewed shared that they utilized the School Messenger alert system to text and e-mail community members, then cross posted those messages to Facebook and Twitter. Other communication, such as the Scholastic Book Fair and other school-wide events were communicated on a more building to building basis within the district. Some administrators chose to announce events via Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, while other preferred to use their weekly newsletter only for such messaging.

In addition to the concerns of accessibility, such as stakeholders with audio and visual impairments, school stakeholders have also taken into consideration those who have schedules that do not always allow for flexibility. Attending district Board of Education or Parent Teacher Organization [PTO] meetings can be difficult for this population. A majority of the stakeholders who participated in this study have children in school in the Highlander School District. This is important because, issues surrounding childcare are a main concern when it comes to the ability of some parents to attend district meetings, particularly those held at night. The district was sympathetic to those concerns and has, in the past, made an effort to remove some obstacles to

meeting attendance. One such event held by the district was called “Parent University.” It was a series of presentations in which the district paid for a speaker to come and educate parents on a parenting related topic that impacted school. Not only did the district pay for the speaker, but they also provided childcare in order for parents to be able to attend.

And they ran for five I think, like Parent University type things. So, we had the “hidden in plain sight” presentation, we did kind of focused on the parent side, we had, I forget the person's name off top my head, but he did a talk about social media for elementary school students. And actually, one of the shifts that night is specifically was we brought a magician in, so parents could bring their children and the children went to go work with the magician. And then while the magician did his show, the parents were with the presenter. And he did a talk about social media, like, how to understand social media for parents’ kind of presentation. (Elliot)

The district sought public support and attendance for the Parent University seminars, so they provided childcare and entertainment for kids to encourage more parents to attend. Elliot explained that the relationship that the school has with the public is important to administrators so childcare was provided as a way to show families that their needs were being considered as part of the planning process. Additionally, that the topics was social media for parents and that childcare was provided speaks to the commitment on the part of the school district for improving communication and engaging more community members. This represents one strategy the district took to rebuild community relationships damaged by the lack of transparency and care of previous district leaders. In addition to Parent University, Highlander School District offered a range of in-person parent meetings including the fall Open House (available at each district

school), parent teacher conferences (offered twice a year fall/spring), and monthly PTO meetings. The PTO is a parent-led organization that provides support for each local school in form of fundraising and materials. The PTO occasionally supplements the cost of academic events such as field trips and school dances. The PTO will also offer grants for students and teachers as an additionally way to support learning in the district. Membership in the organization is voluntary and contingent on being a member of the local community. Typically, PTO members have a child within the school system, though that is not required.

Despite the desire to foster a sense of inclusivity, some parents felt that the PTO's communication style alienated some parents and members of the community who would otherwise participate in the meetings. Mira, a community member with children in Highlander Schools, reported feeling that the communication process utilized by the current PTO was ineffective in fostering a sense of belonging and welcome among its parent members.

You're always invited to PTO meetings, I'm not sure who does the inviting.

I don't know, because I don't go to them. But I will say the invite comes out like the night before, which, you know, is that by design? Or not? How can you get a sitter? And they're usually I think those meetings, though, are usually during the day. But Yes, if you need a sitter for sure, Yeah. So those probably could those invites could probably be a little better organized. [does]the PTO have a section on the website or their own kind of communication hub? They just send emails. (Mira)

While the PTO is a parent run organization and its communication policies are not governed by the school district, the organization has a symbiotic relationship with district administrators in that they rely on one another for information sharing and the betterment of the school district

community. Therefore, the ways in which the PTO leaders communicate with and encourage participants directly reflects the district and its expectations for communication.

I like both. I think it's I think it's nice to have the face-to-face conversations at the PTO [Parent Teacher Organization] meetings. But I know that not everyone can attend those meetings, we even had them have we offered to at night, and it really didn't change the dynamics of the people who are attending them. But it's nice to then have that electronic ability to communicate with a larger audience. And it's, I would think it's pretty effective. (Everly)

District leaders including Everly, discussed the importance of sending messages that are meant to be widely received by the community. Digital communication such as e-mail and School Messenger has allowed the school district to send correspondence quickly and directly to almost all of their stakeholders. While traditional communication such as PTO meetings provide district leaders the chance to speak directly to the community and forge personal relationships with those who are able to attend, digital communication provides the opportunity for a message to find a wider audience of community members who might not otherwise be able to attend classic in-person meetings.

I was just going to say we had two other--as I'm sitting here thinking, we do send out newsletters. There we, you know, we do have a new superintendent this past year. So, there are more quarterly newsletters that gets sent home. When I do send out information with those newsletters. I do leave copies at each of the town libraries and I do leave that information

in the park and recreation offices, for any families that are coming through there for registration. (Florence)

Florence shares the ways that communication has increased and also the steps that she takes to place physical copies of newsletters throughout the community. Her approach suggests her continued reliance on the physical ways to share information. Information sharing is important to district leadership and they are trying to put messaging in the hands of all community members. Florence mentioned the school budget as a particular topic that the district wanted to communicate clearly to the community. In that case, she and other school stakeholders went so far as to plan special presentations for the growing number of residents who do not have school-aged children. Specifically, several budget presentations were held in various town locations so that all residents had the opportunity to hear the budget proposal from the Superintendent of schools and ask questions if they so wished. Florence noted that the purpose of this strategy was not only to establish public support for the budget, but to also begin to earn back some trust amongst the broader town community.

Building Public Trust

A key facet of repairing relationships and reaching intended stakeholders was building the public trust. The public lost faith in the ability of Highlander school leaders to communicate effectively about school issues, which resulted in turnover, not only of school staff at the administrative level, but of school board members as well. Newspaper articles and social media posts from the school year before the change in district leadership showed public outcry over budgeting, school staffing, and other administrative decisions. One event in particular seemed to get a lot of attention on the various social media pages. A unified art teacher was let go from their his/her position as a result of budget cuts. The program and teacher were both beloved by

community members and social media posts from this time were passionately written and the concerns were raised at a Board of Education meeting. Ultimately, nothing could be done to save the position or retain the teacher within the district. Even once this was determined, concerned parents continued to post about the matter online, and the topic continues to pop up on occasion even now, several years later. With that and other incidents involving disagreement between the school district and the community, the new administrators and board members had been tasked with positively changing the narrative of school-community relations in a way that fostered a feeling to trust amongst stakeholders.

I think that's important thing for us to just, you can't say it enough, you know, and we're going to make decisions that are going to make some parents angry, even if they're in the best interest of children that may be in the best interest of another child, you know. And I think, like, we just can't say that enough, and just have to keep reinforcing that. Like, we're in this together. We try really hard. And when we make mistakes or missteps, that we're going to correct it and that we're going to take care of their kids. You know, you just can't say that enough. (Elliot)

Interviews with school stakeholders showed a strong feeling for desired home-school partnership and a willingness to work together with parents and community members on school issues. As Elliot suggested, there was a feeling among school stakeholder participants that everyone, parents, community members, and school personnel were coming together with a common goal of supporting children in education. However, some of the parent participants had a nearly opposite take on the school-home partnership. The lack of trust, perhaps left over from previous interactions with the school system but clearly ongoing, was considered by some parents as a

barrier to full and transparent communication. Parents and community members interviewed reported feeling that they were not invited to be equal partners in their child's education in previous years, and that the school system did not do enough to reach out and include them. Some community members, like Mira, felt that the school system was positively changing now that new administrators and board members had assumed roles once held by the previous administration.

Prior to Mr. Montana [pseudonym] becoming the principal at Greenville Elementary, I didn't feel as welcomed into the school, as I do now that he's there. I felt like the parents' presence was not really wanted as much. And honestly, now that he's there, we're invited, you know, to everything and I think it's fantastic. (Mira)

As Mira suggested, district administrators and leaders have the power to connect and engage families. School stakeholders voiced a desire to connect with and include families in school matters both digitally and in-person. Parents and community members shared this desire and looked to district leaders to promote a sense of belonging and acceptance within their school communities.

While Mira had a positive experience with the district leadership and feeling included, not all community members shared this sentiment. A sub-group community members that emerged from the data were those community members whose children receive special education services and required extra support from district staff. The resource allocation for special education and the increase in parents advocating for their children can often lead to areas of contentiousness between home and school. The ways in which they expect to be communicated with are sometimes different than community members whose children are considered "general

education” meaning that they do not require the support of special education staff or programs to be successful in the school environment.

How much do parents need to know? You know, so I mean, as a parent with a kid with these learning differences. You know, I'm not an expert, and I did not want to become an expert in special education or/and learning disabilities. I fully supported my son as well as I could. I've learned a little bit of this and now, but I definitely wanted to rely on the professionals in the school district to provide the leadership. And then what I realized over time, is that it [school leadership for special education] wasn't necessarily there. So that was a little scary in terms of communication, no in terms of, they wouldn't communicate, because they didn't have anything to communicate. (Greta)

In this case, Greta relied on information sourced from social media pages to help her become knowledgeable in special education practices specific to Highlander School District. When she felt that her needs are not being met by district officials, and special education resources provided by the district are not enough to answer her questions, she sought answers from her peers. This revealed a gap in communication practices that the district engaged in specific to the needs of students with special education needs, be it an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan. While positive, personal school-home relationships were discussed as important to school stakeholders, some community members, especially those with students receiving special education services, felt that the district could be doing more to reach out and support families in terms of providing information and explanation.

Digital Communication is Accessible

Crossing the Digital Divide

Web-based communication has tools that allow a variety of users' access to a range of content. For instance, users who are hearing or sight impaired have digital options to help provide access to the same messages their peers are receiving. For organizations and school districts, there are often closed captioning or even translation options build directly into the web-based platforms they can choose among communication methods. School Messenger is a web-based service utilized by many local school districts. School Messenger's primary function is as a mass messaging platform that allows a sender, typically the school district, to create and send messages to thousands of users at once (schoolmessenger.com). The Highlander School District sent hard-copy information home to the parents and guardians of enrolled students at the beginning of each year with directions for how to sign up for the system. Those who opted into the messenger service were able to provide their cell phone number, landline, e-mail address, or any combination of those as a way to receive messages in their preferred way. Whenever a message was sent from an administrator, it is sent directly to the users' self-selected preferred location. Highlander School District, for example, will use School Messenger to alert parents of weather delays or dismissals. One school stakeholder, Everly, shared an anecdote about a time School Messenger was used to let parents know about a broken-down bus that would be arriving home later than expected. School Messenger, as used in Highlander School District, has the capability to direct messages to specific targeted groups of intended users. Messages from this platform were sent directly and purposefully to only parents of children at the affected school or group. This allows for direct communication to the target audience. In addition to specific parent grouping, School Messenger is adaptable in other ways.

School Messenger itself now has a chat box, where you can translate into one of like, 40 different languages. Right in there, it's super helpful. It's limited, it's kind of like a Google Translate. I don't know if all the grammar is correct. But I can check-translate. And if that family has identified when they register that the language at home isn't English, primarily, power school, and most of information systems allow you to identify what language is the primary language, and School Messenger picks up on that field, and then will translate into that language. (Elliot)

Although Highlander School District was rather homogenous, the ability for messages to be translated into multiple languages increased inclusivity showed a desire for stronger communication across populations. As Highlander School District continued to build community relations and trust, sending direct and accessible communication to members who had identified a primary language other than English was one way to foster positive feelings of belonging among these community members. In addition to the specific capabilities of the School Messenger platform, digital communication provided other forms of inclusion for stakeholders in the district. When asked about what digital methods support school-home communication, one participant said, "It's interesting, because everything is pretty instantaneous now. Especially with this remind app, it's almost like texting the teacher. So, it goes two ways, and they've [teachers and administrators] all been very good about getting right back to you" (Ann). However, not all schools in the district accessed the same technology and with the same rate of responsiveness. Parents and community members in Highlander School District sought timely and accurate information regarding school issues, in particular those issue that relate directly to one's own child. It was clear that community members appreciated the speed of

messaging that digital communication has to offer, especially when something had gone wrong. Ann mentioned the remind app, which is a largely teacher-driven undertaking. Interested teachers sign-up for an account using the app online or via their own cell phone. Once they have created an account through a feature called “Remind,” teachers or administrators can “create a class” which is a group of users who will receive text message reminders from the teacher or administrator directly to their phone or e-mail, whichever they prefer. Parents or community members must make the choice to sign- up for this additional communication service using a code provided by the teacher or administrator who “owns the class.” Typically, teachers send out reminders for homework, field trips, and other school events using the Remind app. At the time of these findings, Highlander School District did not have a formal policy in place regarding the use of the Remind app. Some teachers and administrators chose to set up classes and send out reminders, others chose not to do so. Community members who had experience with the remind app had a largely positive response to how convenient and accessible the information was, especially for communicating homework information. However, because no policy has been created to ensure uniformity and appropriate use of this and other digital platforms, it was apparent that not all families had the same experience with regard to how information was sent home and the quality of information that was provided.

Digital communication allows parents the opportunity to connect with teachers in ways that previous hard copy or phone communication did not. As Ann mentioned, the two-way nature of the remind app gives parents the opportunity to quickly communicate with a teacher or administrator. Other participants cited two-way communication between school and home as a district advantage when it comes to using digital platforms. Multiple administrators discussed the current “24 hour” policy regarding school-home correspondence. This district-wide policy

stated that when a parent reached out to a Highlander School District teacher or administrator, the staff member was obligated to respond to the parent within 24 hours of receiving the communication. From the school stakeholder perspective, digital communication made adhering to this policy more manageable than if phone calls were the required communication method. They felt that they benefited from the ability that an e-mail provides; it can be sent at time that is convenient to the sender, whereas a phone call must be at a mutually agreed on time if a discussion is to take place.

Parents and community members seeking conversations with teachers and administrators about topics specific to their own child had a range of opinions about whether they preferred e-mail or phone correspondence. Although many thought that e-mail was the most efficient way to communicate as both parties could do so at their leisure, in contrast to phone conversations that required a little more planning and coordination. As previously mentioned, a sub-group of parents that emerged from the data were those whose children receive special education services from the district. These participants had a slightly nuanced opinion of the benefits of e-mail and other two-way communication methods. For example, when asked about her digital communication experiences, Greta, the parent of a student receiving educational support, said,

I usually e-mail, especially because I have a child with issues. I like documenting things. So, I'm a real fan of emailing. Phone calling into the schools has always been problematic for all of time, because you can't directly call a teacher. And actually, emailing teachers [has] made direct teacher communications much better. I would say have, again, raising children now for 33 years. (Greta)

As suggested by Greta, another benefit of e-mail communication is that this platform provides users the ability to document correspondence between school and home. Stakeholders who were parents spoke of the importance of digital communication as a way to keep in touch with teachers and staff regarding services and programs implemented on behalf of their children. In addition, the permanence of e-mail correspondence provides a level of comfort and control for parents navigating school communication and policy. Some community members felt that being able to refer back to e-mail written between the school and home helped to make sure that their child's needs were being met in the ways the school had promised. This was another way that trust was being reinforced through communication, but this time with parents taking the lead. In summary, all community members, regardless of whether their child was receiving special education services or not, thought that e-mail communication made teachers and administrators more accessible.

Digital communication is, in most cases, easily accessible and in some cases, user friendly, which allows for messages to be sent quickly and efficiently to thousands of users at the same time. Both school stakeholders and community members discussed ease of use as one of the most appealing aspects of digital communication. All participants in this study had access to and utilize digital means of communication for school-home messaging. E-mail communication in particular was discussed by all stakeholders as the number one method for relaying messages in the Highlander School District. Participants mentioned a variety of reasons for choosing e-mail communication, including inclusivity and transparency emerging as two critical reasons Highlander School District stakeholders, administrators, and parents alike, chose to communicate digitally through this mode of digital communication.

Increased Transparency

District leadership expressed a clear desire to communicate effectively and openly with the public to strengthen relationships and increase the public trust. School stakeholders viewed digital communication as one way to reach community members in a timely manner about issues that are significant to all. Both community member and school stakeholder participants viewed School Messenger and e-mail as an important part of the present communication landscape of the district; the reason stated being that both types of communication share the ability to easily connect a large number of community members, if not all community members, with school information. One participant, Lea, added that the district is actively seeking ways to increase transparency by updating digital methods currently in place. She stated,

That's a function of the age of the technology. We are working, I say we the school district is, is going to release a new website next year, which hopefully will make it a lot easier to search for these things and to find information about meetings and court policies and regulations. So that's something that we've, through the year, like we've been trying to improve transparency. We've been trying to improve the quality of information that we put out there. But it is--we are sort of limited by this website that we have. (Lea)

Lea and other school stakeholders hope that the school website can become the main hub of information in the district. School stakeholders within the district felt that having a centralized location for all important district-wide messages helped to increase transparency and support the release of accurate and timely information. An added benefit is that community members would be able to find quality information easily.

Some stakeholders viewed the current iteration of the website as limiting and flawed. Steps were being taken by the Highlander school district to improve website accessibility so that community members will be more likely to engage with it at a higher rate and frequency than what they are currently. Some administrators and other district leaders noted that an organization's website is often the first exposure a prospective client, or, in the case of the school district, a community member has with district communication. Administrators and stakeholders in Highlander School District feared that the current, confusing website might deter community members from engaging with it as the desired central communication point for district correspondence.

Digital Communication Increases Expectations and Risks

For all of the benefits that digital communication allows, there are also perceived drawback and risks as reported by administrators and school stakeholders in the Highlander School District. Administrators and other School Stakeholders in Highlander School District view web-based communication, social media in particular, as an expedient way to communicate with the public, however some fear the expectations for immediate communication and associated risks that come with instantaneous communication. Elliot, a school stakeholder, sees the speed of social media communication as too fast-paced for the carefully crafted messages that traditional methods of communication allow.

I think acknowledging that the rate of information flow is really fast, that we have to be both conscious of what we send out. Because it's hard to like, say, "oops" and retract. And to, you have to acknowledge that many parents are going to hear things on Facebook, before we communicate it.
(Elliot)

For administrators, Facebook messaging can spread more quickly than they can keep up, which creates a cycle of communication that is reactive rather than proactive. Administrators and other school stakeholders discussed a desire to create transparent and informative messages for the public. Various Administrators shared that they like to take their time with writing messages for the Highlander School District website, sometimes a cycle of days to write, edit, and rewrite for clarity. Unfortunately, the fast-paced world of social media does not support this type of cycle. Website posts allow educators to carefully crafting, vetting, and revising messages before releasing them to the public. In contrast, there was a concern among administrators that social media communication comes with and expectations of instant turn-around, which is unrealistic in all instances for school districts especially in the case of emergencies. In those cases, the district would be reacting to the questions, concerns, and comments of the public without as much time to consider the message. Increased expectations and fear of loss of control both contributed to conflicting administrative feelings regarding the implementation of a social media plan as part of the district's formal communication policy.

Increased Expectations of Communication Standards

Participants remarked that digital communication comes with increased expectations, in particular an increased expectation of responding to messages and inquiries in an accelerated timeframe. Traditional communication has allowed districts to release information and ideas on their own timeline. Some administrators and school stakeholders felt that the fast-paced nature of internet correspondence has led to an expectation that communication will be addressed at a speed that matches the instantaneous nature of web-based communication, which is unrealistic in a setting such as a school. In addition to the increased rate and flow of communication, there are other expectations that participants felt digital communication imposed on them when

corresponding online. When discussing ways that digital communication has changed school-home communication, Elliot considered the ways in which the quality and content of messaging has changed.

You know, it's funny, I say, simple, there's been a couple of times where you go back and forth [while writing] where you need to make the message global, you have to make sure it's inclusive, you have to be detailed. So, there is sometimes you know, you laugh that it takes two hours to send an email out to make sure the flyers in the right format, and the links work. And, you know, you have the right contact information, and then you forget to put the attachment. (Elliot)

The amount of people who will view any given district message combined with the two-way communication digital platforms allows puts pressure on senders to make sure that their messages are as accurate and detailed as possible. A conclusion can be made that crafting careful messages is made difficult when combined with the expectation of speed. Not only is there a perception that messages need to be produced quickly, but these ~~y~~ also need to be inclusive to all recipients, accurate, and combed for spelling, grammar, formatting, and other forms of editing. Meeting all of these expectations seemed to strike some participants as daunting, tedious, and even intimidating.

Fear of Losing Control Over Messaging

One risk of social media communication that administrators and school stakeholders feared was a perceived loss of control related to messages related to school issues. The rate of information flow and the number of people who utilize various platforms of social media can lead to a measure of uncertainty when trying to determine whether a message is being effectively

received. When asked about her level of comfort with web-based communication, one school stakeholder said, “It's just hard to know, whether your message is reaching the people it needs to at any given time, you know, you can, because you can feel like you're doing everything you can feel like you're having this public meeting that's in the newspaper that you've put everything on the website, and there was also a notice to your social media accounts” (Lea). Despite the many methods that Lea used to communicate, she expressed concerns that she cannot say with certainty how her message was being received and whether it was being received in a timely manner. The one-way nature of social media posts and website posts makes one of the reasons for this concern, however it is not that different than the letters that were placed in backpacks in this regard.

In addition to the uncertainty of whether a message was being received, administrators and school stakeholders in Highlander School District also feared loss of time to prepare a carefully crafted message. One school stakeholder, when asked about communication preferences, shared, “Well, I do like it when I can write something up ahead of time, because then I have complete control over the information that gets out. Social media, you do open yourself up to comments” (Florence). Florence’s point was substantiated by Elliot who felt the same:

And so, you know, it's a double edged [sword], because word tends to get out and a lot of other places faster, and if you try to control the communication, so that we have one message, a lot of times that’s not possible. That's just the world we live in, you know, and so you have to think about how you message things and just kind of accept the fact that you can't control that, you know, so it's going to bleed and leak. (Elliot)

Elliot acknowledged the reality that comes with students having access to technology and social media. Informal messages were communicated by people who do not have formal roles in the school district and then the school district was forced to contend with communicating an official message at the same time that they were challenged to address the information that was out in the community.

Conflicted Administrator Feelings

Administrators and school personnel reported conflicted feelings about using digital and social media communication. Priscilla, a school professional whose role required frequent communication with community members, discussed several different types of communication she utilized.

I probably reach more families electronically because the old school paper way--kids lose it. They forget it. The ones that are for the big meetings, we'd always mail at home, so parents got it. So, I don't know if [engagement] necessarily increased but we're able to send reminders, so maybe because we do send reminders -before we send the mailing and that was pretty much it. Now we do send reminders--like a reminder that you know, tickets are coming up or reminder that we have an open house on this night. So probably the ability to send a quick reminder probably does create some of that. I still like face-to-face. It's still my favorite. (Priscilla)

What she, and other participants, seemed to be grappling with is the specific everyday situations in which differing types of communication would be most useful. In her role, Priscilla communicated with parents about disciplinary issues regarding students. She reported a phone call or face-to-face meeting as her preferred method of communication in those cases. The

content of such a communication is often sensitive and personal and requires the personal empathetic touch that can only come from communicating person to person. For other types of communication such as whole school reminders of upcoming events, Priscilla noted that School Messenger or e-mail blasts (sending e-mail correspondence to multiple users at once) were more effective. It is interesting that Priscilla's level of comfort was greater for this than for more personalized information through email. In some ways, the traditional ways that individuals felt comfortable with communicating set the stage for the ways that they were comfortable engaging with digital communication.

Official Communication and Social Media

Formal Communication

District administrators and other school stakeholders had not yet included social media as part of their vision for official district correspondence in the communication section of the strategic plan. At the time of this study, Highlander School District used its Facebook and Twitter accounts as a place to repost information created for other communication platforms such as the website or digital newsletters. Content was not created specifically for social media. The Highlander School District Facebook page was simply a back-up place that shares postings for correspondence created for other platforms. As Florence explained,

Because we don't want the social media pages to be the primary source of information. It's, you know, that information is coming from the superintendent and the different administrators. So, it's just a matter of taking the content, I might need to reword it, but it's the same information [that] get[s] shared out. (Florence)

Therefore, the district does not create content specifically for social media. Some school stakeholders said that their lack of comfort with social media platforms was one reason that

posting original content onto social media platforms was currently not part of the official communication plan. Elliot shared another perspective on social media:

And to some extent, we tell the parents that we acknowledge that, I can't be Facebook, you know? So, we've been criticized a couple times for some events that took place—so that our response wasn't fast enough, that “I already knew about it when I got your email.” And, so well, that's going to happen, because Facebook isn't responsible for being accurate. You know, Facebook isn't responsible [for the fact that we've had] some tragedies happen here. And some of those tragedies parents knew about before I sent anything out. But if I'm wrong, that's a horrible thing for us to do as a school district. If Facebook's wrong, you know, I mean, there was one incident or I learned about some of the things that happened, based on some Facebook posts that we didn't know about, but the family wasn't communicating with us. They were communicating through Facebook.

(Elliot)

Through Elliot's quote, one can see the conflicted feelings that he had about social media and Facebook, in particular. He recognized that he could not communicate over social media the way that parents and students did because of his role as a professional. He also knew that as much as he did not like some of the posts shared on Facebook, he also learned about situations within the school district. In many ways, social media has become an easy activist platform and the Highlander School District had experienced that phenomena.

Informal Communication

The participant interviews highlighted that the district viewed social media communication as informal. In general, school stakeholders viewed platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as places community members could go to “vent” frustrations and raise concerns that were not necessarily pressing or urgent concerns. The perspective of some school stakeholders was that if a concern was valuable or important enough, then those concerns would be raised in other ways, such as at school board meetings or PTO meetings. With perhaps, another way of looking at this being that the school district devalued the information on social media, unless it was reinforced with specific contact with the district.

Even if an issue is raised on social media, that doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be raised in a board meeting. The issue that comes to mind is there was a parent who was very concerned about inconsistent policy information around bullying. She had discovered if you're going to our website, and you're trying to find out how to report a bullying incident, that there was, depending on [which] school's website you're on, different information. Obviously, that's not a good thing. She had, I know, she raised that on social media, but she'd also attended a board meeting. So that was, kind of, you know, how that gained more visibility. (Lea)

The act of raising a concern on social media does not currently have the legitimacy of concerns raised at a Board of Education meeting. Lea and several other school stakeholders interviewed discussed the idea of appropriate channels for official communication, with social media being excluded from those channels. Those interviewed saw social media as a place for community members to go to vent or to gain support for an idea or topic, however, should a community

member want to make significant change or discuss issues, the administrators prefers those concerns to be raised through e-mail or in person communications rather than via social media.

It's interesting. You know, in that parents' page, there's people that complain, there's always, like, there was this issue with the parking fees [for students to park at the High School]. People feel that they're too high. And there was a petition that was signed by hundreds of people. The Board of Ed never got an email about it. Those people who complain a lot of people who complain on Facebook will just go on there to complain, and they don't do anything about it. (Clara)

School administrators and Board of Education members did not view concerns raised on Facebook as formal or significant until those concerns were also raised to district staff personally. It seems strange that a petition with hundreds of signatures would not have been raised in any formal made in any formal capacity. It is quite possible that this goes back to the previous administration and a feeling in the community that it was a waste of time to attempt communication when it was shown to be unwelcome. The act of asking a question or sourcing answers and ideas from the Facebook group is presently viewed as an informal means of information seeking. While the administrators and Board Members have an expectation for how queries should be raised to them, parents and community members have not been made aware of such channels of information through which they should be communicating any district communication. Unfortunately, community members cannot act upon information they do not have in terms of Highlander School District expectations. The private nature of the Facebook group and the exclusion of some but not all district employees as members has lent itself to a set of unspoken rules of engagement, namely that school stakeholders assume that the parents are

aware that concerns they raise in the private group will not be addressed by administrators or Board of Education members. However, this is not well understood by community members and it is not appropriately articulated by the school district.

District Use of Social Media

The Highlander School District Parent Page is a closed Facebook group that was administered by the community member who created the page. This means that anyone who sought to gain access had to send a “request” to the group’s administrator who then evaluated whether or not a person was eligible to become a member. With closed groups, there are sometimes a few short questions that must be answered before entry is allowed. The only criteria for access to the Highlander School District parent page is to have a child who attends school in the district. Under the “about” section of the page, there were a few norms created by the group administrator that details the rules for community engagement. Basically, the norms stated that all members are parents of children in the district and that topics discussed within the group would be school-related; any discourse within the group would be collegial and appropriate as determined by the group administrator. The Parent Page Facebook administrator also reserved the right to delete or withhold a post that they felt did not abide by the community standards of engagement. The private nature of the group meant that not all school officials had the option to become a member; administrators, teachers, and Board of Education members who did not have children in the district were not welcome to join. This created a communication bubble where direct contact with the school district was limited or even non-existent within the social media sphere. A difference to the norm was that some school personnel held multiple roles in the district and were therefore able to join the private groups and they would, at times, respond as a formal school community member. School stakeholder participants who were also

members of the parent group stated that they would share what was being talked about on the parent page with administrators if they felt it was relevant to school-related conversations at the district level. As a result, administrators and other school stakeholders chose when and if to engage with social media.

Along with the Parent Page having individuals from the district as members in various levels of participation, it also served other purposes. The page was used to update people in the community to topics associated with the schools that parents deemed important. This was different than the formal communication that was shared by the school district. However, some parents did state that they checked social media with more regularity and used it as a source of information, as suggested by Elizabeth:

Normally, we get a lot of written paperwork. I can tell you social media does a lot. You know, we have a Highlander School District parents' group [Facebook page] here, so we can keep everybody, everybody's in tune with what's going on with what school and so on and so forth.

(Elizabeth)

With her comment, Elizabeth intoned that the written paperwork was too much to keep track of so she relied on the Facebook group to see what she needed to stay on top of with school information.

Gauge for issues. There was no official school district policy suggesting how parents who also hold administrative roles within the school district can or should engage on social media. As a result, there were a few unwritten rules that those who have dual roles follow. In speaking with a few school stakeholders, who also sent their children to school in Highlander School District, a few unspoken guidelines emerged including that some participants stated that

they abstained from social media outright, so as not to blur what they felt were the lines between personal and professional communication. As Anthony shared,

I monitor it, but not I don't communicate back? I just look for information of things going on. And then I also look for, you know, I use it as somewhat of a gauge people's perspective on things. (Anthony)

These participants felt that it would be inappropriate to post their ideas and opinions related to school based issues on social media as those opinions might be misconstrued as the official district stance, so they chose not to become members of the private group. Those who chose to engage with social media and who were members of the private parent group did so as a pulse check for what they believe were topics that were important to parents and community members.

So right now, the way that I use social media, I have my own personal accounts. I mostly use them to follow people and to read. And I don't chime in a whole lot. Until I see something from you know, somebody in the community, it might be saying something about a [community] issue. And then I may chime in and say, 'oh, by the way, yeah, here's another information. Here's the meeting where we, his is discussed.' (Lea)

Florence, Anthony, and Elizabeth (all school stakeholders) shared that they checked social media as a way to stay informed about topics parents and community members care about, but that they did not usually choose to respond about those concerns.

I always, when I go into different settings, 'okay, I'm wearing this hat or that.' But you know, as a parent, I am part of that Facebook group. And, you know, I do think sometimes it gives you information about what issues are in the community that people are concerned about, or things that they're

not concerned about are going great. So, I, we do, I mean, I do I look at that to say, 'okay, this is a good gauge,' or 'Oh, alright, I've got to be careful on the wording next time we share something online to make sure that there's no ambiguity.' (Florence)

Participants reported that in their view, users come to social media for different reasons including those who come to social media seeking information, but who do not engage with content. These type of social media non-participants are called "lurkers." Clara, a school stakeholder, described one reason that she prefers lurking to interacting with content. She said, "I've learned to be more of a lurker, I guess, because if you dip your toe in anything, it could get vicious; people can be very mean" (Clara). Clara and others expressed fear over engaging online because of the negative culture they have observed, in the parent Facebook group in particular. The fear of being personally attacked or harassed by other member of the community served as a deterrent for those who might otherwise post, including those who hold leadership roles within the district, as Clara does. Ann, a community participant shared that she brought up a controversial topic on the Parent Page and was met with outrage from the community. She shared, "The [other community members] were upset, they called me a bully. Because I was making [the situation] public and that nothing was done about it. It was very intimidating, for sure" (Ann). This example showcased one of the ways that social media could be contentious, which is a reason that some people avoid it.

There was even an instance, where the previous superintendent personally called members of the Facebook Parent group regarding a particularly heated school-related conversation they were having. Some group members assumed that she had found out about their online comments or had even perhaps personally read them based on the individuals she

had chosen to call. One member posted, “The Superintendent is calling people directly this morning who have made comments on [the Private Parent Page] in opposition to the [staffing change]!” From examining the comments, it was clear that there were a range of reactions. Some individuals posted their personal phone numbers hoping the Superintendent would see it and call them if she was, indeed, reading the comments. While others accused the original poster of spreading rumor and applauded the superintendent for taking the time to make phone calls to concerned community members. One person on the post suggested that those who felt passionately about the topic should attend a Board of Education meeting and share their opinions. This idea, of community involvement at Board of Education meetings was one that was also shared through the interviews. School stakeholders and community members interviewed shared that members of the Parent Group will encourage one another to contact administration directly or speak at a Board of Education meeting about topics they care about.

Encouraging unsatisfied community members to engage in phone conversations with administrators or attend Board Meetings hypothetically provides a level of comfort and safety outside of the unknown and anonymity of social media communication. However, attending these public meetings opens one up to a different level of stressors including public speaking and having a wider audience from which one can be harassed. Unfortunately, there is no conflict or stress-free communication environment.

Despite sharing that individuals have modified the ways that they interact with social media there was a limited number of participants who spoke to questions that dealt with the ways that technological advances have changed school policies. Participants from the Highlander School District were all clear in their belief that advancing trust through open-communication is a district goal. However, they could not make the leap to connecting that their informal policy of

limited social interaction was in contrast with their larger goal. In reviewing posts made by users in the Parent Facebook Page as well as reports from those interviewed, the information showed that venting dissatisfaction and seeking like-minded peers was sometimes the goal of Facebook posting and commenting. However, the very use of the platform seemed to frustrate some participants in leadership positions, in particular those who play dual roles in the district like Clara. As a school stakeholder and a parent with school-aged children, she had access to the private Facebook account. Clara shared that she did not always engage with content on the Facebook page, but rather that she used her access as a way to determine what issues parents seemed to care about or what were of particular concern. In Clara's role, she used information observed through "lurking" to alert other school stakeholders to issues that might affect conversations about school-related topics.

[Social Media] is a double-edged sword. Sometimes, if I see something brewing on Facebook, I will then record it, to Central Office, like heads up, "this is coming down the pike' So that they have a heads up or a [warning that there are a] bunch of angry parents that are coming to a Board of Ed meeting-- just you might want to brush up on whatever it is that they're talking about. (Clara)

Another school stakeholder, Lea, shared that she did post in the private group from time to time as a way to encourage parent participation in school events or to invite parents to Board of Education meetings to share their concerns.

So, I would say, the parents are most active on Facebook. And that's where I tend to spend most of my time. If I'm on a social media. Even so I am, I am acutely aware that [this] is like a subset of the families in the district.

And it's not only the families that you want to communicate with this to everybody. But there are like, there is this Highlander School District parents group that a parent had created. And that's where a lot of you know, school related discussion happens. So, I try to stay on top of that and chime in, [if] I can about, if anybody has raised like a board level issue or wants to know about, say, like schedule changes that have happened in middle school or whatnot. Those are questions I try to answer there. (Lea)

In addition to the private group for all parents in the district, Lea stated that she was also a member of another private group that caters specifically to parents of children with special needs. This group served as a forum for parents to raise concerns specifically related to special education topics and concerns. This group served as a place that allowed parents to have their questions answered by other parents who had the shared experience of raising special learners in Highlander School District. In this way, social media was demonstrated to serve as a place that offered support and community.

Social Media as a Community Good

Social media provides community support in unique ways. Through these platforms, community members offer support to one another and answer questions about a range of topics. The towns of Greenville and Mapleton had a variety of Social Media groups in addition to the private parent page found on Facebook. One example is Greenville Gabs, a town social media page, which was open to all residents of Greenville and Mapleton. This social media group offered a forum for users to seek opinions and recommendations about any and all town related topics: where to have dinner on a Friday night, whether any residents provide snow removal services, or even where one could find beekeeping supplies locally.

In Greenville Gabs there's more bantering and more, you know, communication light. Somebody will say, "I need such and such," and someone else is like, "oh, I have one." "Do you want to meet at Starbucks, and I'll give it to you?" You know, my kids just joined the soccer team. And does anyone have any cleats? (Greta)

The social media community in Greenville centered largely on connecting community members with goods and ideas. In addition to Greenville Gabs, there was another social media group, Greenville Buy Nothing Page. This local page was inspired by similar ones in many towns across the state. Buy Nothing pages allow residents to post items from their homes that they are offering for free. It is similar to a digital tag sale/garage sale, but there is no cost involved. This allows neighbors to connect one another with goods that are no longer of use to one family but may be helpful to another.

From this instance, it can be seen that social media not only connects people with ideas and information, but also with tangible goods they might need. Participants felt that being able to share goods and services through social media helped to forge stronger ties to their neighbors. Greta felt that the tone of groups such as Greenville Gabs was more light-hearted than the parent page dedicated to only school topics. However, other participants mentioned that Greenville Gabs and other community sites could turn "toxic" when discussions of politics and other emotionally charged subjects were broached. To combat the turn to negativity, some community based groups in Greenville and Mapleton opted for strict guidelines and rules that discourage conversations that could become heated or overly negative. Some groups in the larger community went so far as to ban political discussion altogether, while others had strict codes against personal attacks among group members. Users who break the community guidelines

were subject to having their posts or comments deleted or even to being removed from the group at the discretion of the group administrator. Some study participants explained that they choose not to post in the community form similar reasons as to why they do not post in Facebook Parent Page, but also includes-the fear of becoming a target for hostile comments. Still, study participants remained group members as the behaviors they have observed in the group have been more helpful and informative than harmful. When asked about group engagement, community member Mira said:

I've never posted, I think once I might have answered, I kind of still feel like 'I'm new here', believe it or not, even though we're going to be here six years. But no, I've never posted. And I know a lot of people will ask for recommendations through that page for tutors, or whatever. People do seem to be pretty helpful. (Mira)

Even though she did not feel comfortable posting or responding, Mira still acknowledged the value in being a member of social media.

Under the previous school district administration, there was an incident involving one of the administrators. The matter was not widely discussed or known about until a parent raised a concern in the private Parent Facebook group. Eloise, a community member, discussed finding out about the incident online and the steps she took following the revelation.

I only found out about it through the Parent Group, so I did a Freedom of Information Act to show that they [the school district] didn't do an investigation. And I posted that information online. And people were, some people, were very upset. Like, "If you don't like it, why are you here?" Or

it sounded like you shouldn't air dirty laundry. It was like they wanted to keep it in quiet in the school system. (Eloise)

Despite negative feedback from her peers, Eloise pursued the matter outside of social media. After an investigation, it was found that there was wrongdoing on the part of the administrator and disciplinary action was taken by the district as a result. This serious situation might have gone unresolved or swept under the rug had Eloise not found out the details online through social media.

It seems like a lot of more, if there are issues if things have happened, believe it or not, you find out. I mean, that's where I find out about some of the stuff that's happening at the high school, even though I don't have kids there yet. You know, they'll, parents will vent about, like the vaping issue happening. I seem to find out about all those [negative] things that you don't really want to know about. But you have to know about those, and everybody's very respectful and nice. People will post you know, positive things too, about what the girls' soccer team did, or whatever. But also, it seems to be more of a, it's where you find out the scoop on a lot. (Mira)

Along with a way to learn about information, other community members appreciated the camaraderie of being a member of an online community. Many posts on the Parent Facebook Page celebrated the accomplishments of local kids. Some of these posts even called the community to action by encouraging participation in various events that supported the schools. Post analysis included Facebook content saying, "Shot-out to the [PTO] for organizing a successful volunteer dinner!" and another saying, "it has been a joy to watch the boys' soccer team this season. Well-deserved win today!" along with a picture of the team embraced in a

huddle. Elizabeth, a community member, enjoyed this aspect of social media communication saying:

It's the shout outs to like, 'hey, the chess team is doing this' or, 'hey, we got the swimmers are doing a carwash,' you know, support them or the baseball team. As I have experienced before, we're just so busy that you know it just while you're scrolling, you're scrolling and you see, 'Oh, hey, baseball team, they're having carwash. Let's go get our car washed.' I think it's just, it's a great way for, to let everybody know what's going on. It's wonderful for that. (Elizabeth)

Similarly, to Elizabeth, Mira preferred to read and engage with the posts that promoted positive community engagement.

Someone recently posted something that I thought was heartwarming and vital; it was right after graduation. It was about, you know, she said, 'I think we need to give a shout out to all those kids who don't get invited to all the parties. The average kid, the kid who doesn't graduate with a 4.0. The kid who's not going on to an Ivy League School', she said 'they graduated too, and they made it, and they need to be honored and celebrated.

(Mira)

It can be concluded that community members turn to social media as a place to ask questions about topics related to their child's school life, however, it was the larger sense of community and belonging that encouraged them to stay and engage. Some participants, like Mira, noted the sentimental aspects of community building, other participants felt that the ability to connect with

knowledgeable peers was another valuable aspect of social media. One participant felt that fellow community members offered valuable content, saying,

Well, Eloise, who is a brilliant woman, she really gets into linking people to studies, linking people to lawsuits, linking people to new laws in Connecticut. You know, linking people to news articles that are relevant to some of the issues we're having in the district. I mean, she's like a fountain of... I mean, I just, [and] I doubt the people on that page will appreciate what she's sharing. Because she's spending so many hours and becoming such an expert and sharing all this stuff with us for free. (Greta)

Facebook and other social media pages make it possible to connect parents like Greta with information that they might not otherwise be able to find or found with the ease that social media provides. Community members like Eloise and others who were knowledgeable about educational and other topics were able to share their expertise widely with anyone who needed to be connected to that information. In this way, social media serves the function of contributing a public good where people can exchange ideas, information, and goods with one another. The Facebook groups in the communities that make up the Highlander School District showed a range of community engagement.

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: Parents Taking Leadership Roles

Community members in Highlander School District believed that the primary benefit of social media is that it provides an outlet for conversation and discourse unlike any other form of communication. Many participants from both the community member and stakeholder groups discussed the importance of social media for giving a voice to those who might not otherwise be able to come to district meetings or engage with their child's education in another way. Parents

therefore have a voice in their child's education in a variety of ways. Community members shared a feeling of empowerment in seeking and sharing information about school related topics. Each participant engaged with the Facebook parent group to differing degrees, but all found the group helpful in different ways. Some took an active role in creating content and responding to the questions and posts of fellow users. Others opted for a more passive experience, simply reading the posts and comments made by the community, taking away key pieces of information they felt personally useful or enlightening. When asked about ways in which they engage with the online parent group one community member shared that she used the platform as a space to advocate for all district students, not just her own. She said:

I post about a range of topics. People assume that I'm posting about it, because I have a personal interest in it. Like my kids are always getting in trouble. And I have to worry about them being searched and stuff. Now, I've never said that. I only advocate for kids whose parents won't come forward. Because they're embarrassed, that their kid might be getting in trouble. I don't care what anyone thinks about that why I post. I just think our concern should be for all kids. (Eloise)

Through the use of social media, parents like Eloise were able to speak up and share information in ways that they previously would not have been able to do so. From her perspective, not only was she able to advocate for kids, she was also able to advocate for their parents. She was able to share what she knew and allow others to be anonymous in a way that she believed made the whole community better. Posting district communication, research articles, and thought-provoking questions are all ways that Eloise used social media as a way to amplify messages and get information into the hands of her peers. This was similar to another who posted a question

seeking community feedback and reactions about issues with state budget money having been withheld from The Highlander School District over a time-period of 5 years. Over 100 people commented on the post and engaged in discussion. These comments extended beyond just opinion, as community members on the thread offered articles and facts readers could reference in building and discussing the topic. While not every question or article receives the same high level of engagement from the community, many do. As a result, parents in Highlander School District were able to become informal educational leaders in their community by using social media connections to post information and engage with other community members. Florence, in her dual role as a school stakeholder and community member, preferred to keep to “lurking” within the group, but reported that she had seen Facebook group members engage in a variety of ways. She shared:

I have seen that happen, where people have shared concerns. And I've also seen on those pages where people say, ‘you need to make those contacts, or you’re not going to get what you need. Are you getting the most accurate information or the accurate information? And the right way to do this is to contact administrator, find out information.’ (Florence)

In this way, Florence described some of the parent-to-parent monitoring that attempted to make sure that educators at Highlander School District were being kept in the conversation and that information was based on facts more than speculation. Additionally, Florence and other participants felt that Facebook Parent group members had created a community of their own, one where they could come to ask questions and get answers from their peers. Community members who had questions or ideas but did not know what next steps to take found encouragement and guidance in their Facebook community. While some received answers from fellow users, others

were advised to seek other outlets such as contacting an administrator directly. A conclusion can be made that these connections might not be otherwise possible were it not for a digital communication platform such as Facebook to connect them, as social media allows individuals who do not know one another in real life but who share a common interest to connect with one another. Another area that some community members suggested as important was that the Facebook group provided a safe space to post content, particularly when community members did not feel comfortable going to and speaking up at a district meeting or even sending a message to district staff. One participant mentioned that the thought of speaking at a Board of Education Meeting felt intimidating. Others felt that the time constraints of connecting with administrators by phone or attending a district meeting was simply not realistic given their busy schedules. The district Facebook page does contain posts for the Board of Education meetings, however the information is typically posted day the same day as the meeting, which does not provide much advanced notice. Such posts include a graphic that has the school logo and a message, “Join us for a Board of Education Meeting Tonight.” With these posts, there was also a link connecting community members to videos and live-streaming of the meetings through an outside streaming service. An analysis of several Board of Education invitations on the district page showed very few “likes” and limited shares. The Parent Facebook group gave community members a space to be heard when other forms of communication were not seen as feasible or desirable.

Inconsistent Social Media Across the District

Social media was inconsistently used and monitored across the Highlander School District. After reviewing the official accounts held by the school district it appeared that both the Twitter and Facebook accounts managed by central office staff were utilized as a place to

amplify announcements and correspondence created for other distribution platforms. The schools who utilized Twitter, for example, were often “retweeted” onto the District’s official Twitter page. Most “retweets” were from the High School and one elementary school, whose principal had embraced Twitter as a way of celebrating student success. The other elementary schools and middle schools were not represented with as much frequency. Consistent use of Twitter across the school district and having it start in the elementary school is a way that the Highlander School District could engage community members in an easy way and foster continued engagement over time.

None of the content shared at the time of this study was created specifically for social media. In addition, under the policies in place in The Highlander School District, social media use was up to the discretion of each individual staff member. When asked about social media accounts held by district staff, Elizabeth stated, “I think anyone with a title. Like, for sports, or, you know, any clubs or anything like that, they’ll use Twitter. I’m not a big Twitter person.” Review of the social media sites showed that sporting events and posts from teachers and coaches were among the most posted about items on the official district social media pages, with this especially so for Twitter in particular. For example, the Highlander School District Twitter page was a landing space for celebratory district news and information. One tweet said, “Congratulations to the 5th grade chorus on an amazing concert last night!” Another, stated, “Congratulations to Annie and Clark [pseudonyms] on being recognized at the Scholar Leader Banquet!” and shared a picture of the students who had received the honor. Other tweeted topics included school closing details, event information, and reposting of classroom celebrations as among the most commonly tweeted topics on the district Twitter page. The idea behind having a central Twitter account is that the school district should have more community member

followers than any individual teacher or coach, thus reposting it would allow the message to be shared to a wider Highlander School District audience.

I think making sure that all of our communications are as best as possible, kind of documented, and easy to find. So that you didn't have to be like at the elementary school on Tuesday to hear me speak to know what we talked about. So that as a parent, you can say, 'Oh, well, everything's there.'

(Elliot)

Just as they saw the benefit of a main Twitter account, the district had a desire to centralize communication through the website so that all members of the community knew where to turn to for the answers and information they sought. The administration hoped that these changes would streamline the communication flow and centralize messaging.

Generational Use of Technology

There was a perception among both administrators and community members that there is a generation gap in utilizing social media. Administrators interviewed did not count themselves among the "social media generation" despite having social media correspondence as part of their role within the district. However, students were believed to be part of the "social media generation."

So earlier this year, one of the principals came and said, 'can I create an Instagram account?' Interesting, you know, I mean, and her point was, that, that's where her parents are, you know, and like, it's funny, I don't think I'm that old. But, you know, I have to realize that many of the parents, especially like, incoming kindergarteners are a different generation, you know, and especially ones who have their first child in Kindergarten. You

know, some of them are, you know, 26 and 26-year olds are kind of like “Facebook is what, like, grandma uses get out, like, I use Instagram and Snapchat,” ‘that’s the world that they’re in. And so again, our adaptation is to go over [to where] our parents are, and so if that’s how your parents want to communicate, [but] we don’t use every social media tool under the sun.

Yeah, but you do have to kind of start to evolve your thinking. (Elliot)

Elliot acknowledges that the ever-evolving nature of social media including trends that change frequently make it difficult for the school district to keep up and learn the nuances of each platform. In addition, some school-based participants feared that committing to multiple platforms of social media would reduce the quality of content across communication methods. In essence, there was a concern that more was not better when it comes to clear communication. The school social media pages reflected this sentiment. On any given day, the school district Tweets and Facebook posts looked nearly identical. In particular content involving weather-related closures and upcoming school events used the same messaging.

Some school stakeholders, like Elliot, perceived that only certain age groups of users engaged with different types of social media applications. In reviewing the district social media pages, both district supported and community created on both Facebook and Twitter, it was clear that most of the community members who engaged with social media comments and posts were of a wide range of age demographics on those platforms. There were topics pertaining to students from pre-school all the way to high school graduates that were addressed on the school pages. On the town pages, the age range was even wider with engagement from demographics that extended beyond child rearing years. The Highlander School District community was home to many residents over the age of 65, some of whom participated in the various town pages.

Communication policy and strategy within the district was being implemented under the assumption that those on social media were primarily a younger demographic; focusing engagement solely on one group of community members might mean alienating other demographics. When discussing this topic, one participant said:

[That] is why we try to hit different mediums. You know, you do have a certain demographic that uses Instagram. The district does not yet have an Instagram site, but the schools, a couple of the schools are starting to develop their own Instagram pages. Even just social media with Facebook is a totally different demographic. (Florence)

Florence contended that within the scope of social media communication there exists a wide range of communication options, and at the time of this study each school principal had the autonomy to decide when, if, and which type of social media communication to engage with. The result was that some schools were engaging with social media such as Instagram, while others were not. There was clearly inconsistency in the way that each school within the district engaged with social media as there was no formal policy in place that governed all schools' social media use. Therefore, some schools were better at engaging an audience that utilizes social media than others. Community members shared that such inconsistencies amplify a feeling of inequity across schools. Some school leaders acknowledged and embraced the ever-evolving ways that parents and community members communicate, while those who were uncomfortable with evolving communication styles chose to disengage.

Need for Policies and Digital Communication Continuity

Despite the fact that school stakeholders wanted the website to function as the center of communication, community members felt that this had not been made clear to them. When

responding to a question about social media versus more traditional forms of communication, Elliot discussed the pitfalls he saw with utilizing an informal platform like Facebook as a central communication hub for district correspondence. He said,

But that's a forum that in many cases, Facebook turns very toxic...., And I think it's hard if you have too many places for people to go. I think parents are busy. And so, if our website is our primary place where our information is--to duplicate that on Facebook, then you get into this, 'well, do I go to the website or go to Facebook, it was on one, but I am not on the other'. So, I think my philosophy prior to getting here was build a district website that had everything people needed, and then train them to kind of access it from that. (Elliot)

District administrators and Board of Education members agreed that the website needed to be reworked to provide the quality communication that the district desired. It is important to note that from the district standpoint the information posted on the official District Facebook Page was merely a duplicate of information posted on the website. The inconsistent use of social media for district function resulted in the inconsistent sharing of information for those who relied on social media as their primary source of information. However, the district hopes to remedy this problem by creating a new user-friendly website. School stakeholders felt that switching to a different platform would attract community members to the website for correspondence, lessening the need to post messages in duplicate on social media. The website did not have the functionality that the district felt they needed to communicate properly. The homepage is cluttered, some links are broken, and some of the staffing information is inaccurate. Additionally, information that community members expected to find was not easily located

because of the layered nature of information and an inadequate search function on the website. Greta, a community member, expressed concern and frustration about Board of Education related content in particular. The district consistently posted video recordings of Board of Education meetings in their entirety to the Highlander School District website, but it was not easily located by community members. To this point Greta said,

‘Where can they find the video?’ It's hard to find it on the website. It's not impossible to find. But again, you should be pushing that at people and say, have a communicator- marketer, right? ‘You wouldn't believe what happened at this board meeting last Monday. It was so exciting. Here's a link to our video at the at the 20-minute mark, you can see this at the 43-minute mark, you can see that at the 79-minute mark, you can see this,’ and kind of, you know, get people to want to go watch it engaged. (Greta)

Presently, if a community member wanted to watch the Board of Education video they would first have to locate the link on the school website. Community members shared that this in itself was a difficult task. Once they located the video they were then faced with over an hour of content, which was not indexed or broken into clips. Community members who were only interested in one part of the meeting had to fast forward and rewind using trial and error to find the relevant part of the meeting. Greta and other participants felt that this was an inefficient use of time and that they ultimately dismissed the videos as an effective way to seek information.

The Highlander School District also lacked a clear communication plan including the appropriate order in which one should communicate with educational professionals or the associated topics for which one is responsible. This was another area of information that was difficult for parents and community members to locate. Many school stakeholders made

reference to the acceptable channels of communication, typically starting with the classroom teacher and ending with the Superintendent of schools or the Board of Education. When asked about how parents were communicated with about the expected flow of information, many participants shared that expected communication practices have not been formally shared with community members and that a formal communication flow chart or web is not posted anywhere for public access. One school stakeholder said,

No, we don't have a communication channel flow chart for parents and community members right now. But we have talked about kind of putting that up for parents, just recently, like, 'what is the proper chain of command to kind of, you know, go to things, you know, if you have an issue about something, if you want to bring something up, or you know, or if there's a topic you want to, for the board to discuss, or if you want to bring a concern enough about a school or, you know, like things like that.' So, nothing's in place. I think it's more of a "go to your building first," kind of message. But not, there's nothing formalized yet. But there has been brief discussion about that. (Anthony)

Community members who use Facebook as a means of communication felt that concerns raised via social media were not considered valid until they were formally raised to district staff or at a Board of Education meeting. School stakeholders shared this opinion, with many of them emphasizing the importance of following expected channels of communication when raising concerns and engaging with school-related topics. However, many participants, from both the school stakeholder and community member groups, felt that clear delineation of communication would be beneficial in helping community members know who to reach out to and when should

they need to make their voices heard. School stakeholders in Highlander School District emphasized direct communication with school personnel by phone or e-mail as the most important means of engaging. To that end, interviews with school stakeholders revealed their perception and communication bias that if community members do not come to district meetings in person it is because of apathy and lack of engagement. However, in reviewing the comments on the various social media pages in Highlander School District there was high engagement from community members, including those who did and did not attend district meetings in person. Some of the barriers to community members participating in district meetings included issues with childcare and scheduling as deterrents from attending both daytime and evening meetings.

Lack of Information on How to Engage with District Personnel Effectively

Community members and school stakeholders had different ideas about how to communicate with one another. School stakeholders maintained that direct contact as best practice, even when information might have been missed by parents for one reason or another. In response to a question about access to communication for parents and other community members one participant believed that parents are comfortable reaching out to school main offices. She said, “Any parents [who] need that information they go to, they go directly to the office, and it's a phone call to the office, “I didn't get this, I need to have this information.” And those accommodations are always made. So, anything is provided in print if needed” (Florence).

Unfortunately, community member participants were not all aware that this was an assumption on the part of the administration. In fact, some community members felt that it was difficult to get in touch with the school, particularly by phone.

Phone calling into the school has always been problematic for all of time, because you can't directly call the teacher. And actually, emailing teachers made direct teacher communications much better...I know in [other districts] the rule is that you [teachers] have to reply within 24 hours. They clearly do not have that rule in The Highlander School District. But generally, they [teachers] get back to you. But for a parent, that's not a professional that maybe isn't, isn't good with emailing that's not going to help them at all. They're [Parents are] still calling the main office and getting stuck with that three-and-a-half-minute recorded message. 'Press the number for your extension.' If you press the wrong extension, you have to start over. And then when you press [the right extension], you get a voicemail, and then you're leaving a message. Then maybe they get back to you. (Greta)

In contrast to Greta's perspective, several school stakeholders shared that The Highlander School district does have the 24-hour response rule that Greta mentions above. In addition to the trouble with receiving correspondence back from the schools, some participants shared that phone numbers on the web-site were not current. Ann, a community member, also shared that the calendar of events was incomplete, which made it difficult for her to arrange on-the spot transportation for her high-school-aged child, when there were events at school she was not aware of until her child sent her a text message at the last minute about the event.

Social media provides a forum for parents to share messaging and through the comments on the page it is often revealed who may have missed what information. This sharing of information from parent to parent is often how community members fill in the gaps of district messaging. One parent Facebook Page comment was posted regarding vague information shared by the middle school regarding sports registration. The parent wrote, "[the middle school]

athletic program says its registration is ending soon. I clicked the link—it's \$150, but it doesn't say which program it is." This is just one of the over 90 responses to the post, not only was the parent's question answered, but there was a continued conversation about all of the extra-curricular offerings provided, and those not offered that people would like to see, through the school along with information on how to register and tryout. This post also expanded to have included community member comments about the parks and recreation and other town team's students could join should they not be able to participate in school sports for any reason.

Community members interviewed said that they would more likely reach out to other parents for missed information than call the office or go to the school directly. Some community members reported not knowing where or whom to contact. In particular, the school website had become a barrier to effective district communication because it is viewed as a problem. Mira, a community member stated, "I have avoided the website. I'll just send a text to a fellow parent saying, 'Do you know the and ask them so that I don't have to get on the website?'" (Mira) The Highlander School District had been working to build trust through improved communication and believed that they had thought about and made provisions for getting communication effectively to all community members. However, those practices had not all been clearly communicated to the community.

Widely Held Differing Views on Highlander School District Website

The school website was a topic of much concern and debate amongst both community member and school stakeholder participants. Feedback regarding the school website ranged from one participant who commented that it was, "flawless," to others who discussed their frustrations with the often difficult to navigate interface. When asked about the website, one stakeholder said, "Oh, it's flawless. Yeah, it's pretty open, you know, very kid friendly"

(Elizabeth), and another stated, “It's been pretty easy. It's been pretty easy to navigate. It's been clear. They keep it well updated. With staff changes and stuff like that” (Ann). However, another community member, Mira, when asked about the website had the complete opposite response. She shared:

Damn the website. I think it's, I think it's awful. I think when you look at it, you don't know where to go. And I honestly thought I thought it was me, because I'm not the most tech savvy person at all. (Mira)

With the exception of Ann and Elizabeth, all other participants from across stakeholder groups expressed views similar to Mira's, in that they also found the website to be unsatisfactory. In reviewing the website and its content, a few key observations stood out. Administrators and Board of Education members expressed a desire for the website to be the community's central hub for school related topics, and given the layout of information it was clear that the district did keep much of its communication information on the website. However, it seemed that there was an overabundance of information, so that it was quite difficult to readily locate desired content. If parents had questions or needed to find information, it was the administration's hope that the website would be their first source of seeking answers, but at the time of this study, the website was more of a deterrent for communication rather than the hub of communication the district desired.

At the time of this study, the website was not user-friendly, which served to alienate and frustrate community members. Some complications observed include broken links, cluttered homepages, and outdated information. A link is a line of information that leads users to another webpage. On the Highlander School District website, for example, parents could access the school calendar by clicking on the words “school calendar” with their mouse. Doing so

redirected the parents to the school calendar page automatically. It is part of the burden of the website administrator to ensure that all links direct users to the intended location and that the content found there is up to date and accurate. In reviewing the Highlander School District website, it was found that most links redirect users appropriately, though a few are expired (meaning they do not bring the user to the intended locations) and, more importantly, many links were difficult to find due to a cluttered and confusing layout. Eloise, a community member, shared that she often found it difficult to locate the information she needed.

It's our website. And I don't know that all schools have this, but we have a website and it's not particularly well linked to their other modes of communication. I mean, it's easy to get email addresses off of it. But it can be more difficult to find certain things. (Eloise)

When reviewing the website, including in seeking out participants for this study, it was difficult even to locate the proper e-mail addresses that Eloise mentioned in her quote. Some staff members were listed under the incorrect school or title, so it was difficult to decipher which staff worked at which school and in what capacity they served the district. For a parent trying to contact a teacher or reach a principal, that could be a deterrent to communication, particularly through the communication channels the district seemed to prefer e-mail and phone.

I have avoided the website and [I] text, send a text to a fellow parent and saying 'Do you know the' and ask them so that I don't have to get on the website? Especially if I'm [in front of] my computer and I'm on my phone?

Forget it if I'm on my phone. (Mira)

School stakeholders reported that the website was the preferred method of information seeking. However, users like Mira were unable to find the information they sought there and instead

turned to other community members for support and answers. Thus, the district was indirectly releasing control of messaging to the community.

Another important consideration for website communication is the aesthetic of the webpage. For social media accounts, such as the district Twitter and Facebook pages, the aesthetic is largely dictated by the platform itself. The Twitter and Facebook interfaces are both designed by the corporate teams running both companies and there is little opportunity for organizations like Highlander School District to put a personal spin on their site. However, they are able to select a photo to accompany the content, but not much else in the way of personalization. In contrast, when it comes to website design, organizations often have their own autonomy in creating the look of their site. When considering website design, ease of access and use is an important consideration. The site should hold the relevant information an organization wants communicated but needs to do so in way that does not overwhelm or confuse users. The staff directory is one common component of an organization's website. Typically, the information provided here is the names, roles, and contact information for all employees in an organization. In an organization such as a school, where there are many employees, this page has the potential to become saturated with information and therefore difficult for users to access. Additionally, many schools also opt to have this page link to teacher-curated websites and social media accounts for school use. The Highlander School District maintained such a directory. Each school within the district had its own directory with links to the contact information for every individual staff member. At the time of the study, some of the information was difficult to find. Staff roles had not all be updated, and some members were listed under the incorrect schools. For parents and community members seeking to contact school personnel, this was quite frustrating. School stakeholders were aware of the limitations of the website, particularly

with respect to the sheer amount of information being communicated. Recounting all of the information available, Florence said,

Okay, so we do have a lot of information on the website, basically, everything on the website. When there's important information that needs to be shared, like an emergency dismissal or school closings that information does go on the website, it goes out in the social media. We use a platform called School Messenger, and that's what allows the district and each of the building administrators to send out mass emails to families and community members, if they're part of that messenger. (Florence)

The website is the centralized location for all of the district correspondence, and the other modalities of communication were used to support the content created for the website. Similarly, Priscilla, a school stakeholder with administrative responsibilities, shared that most of the information available to parents and community members was posted on the school's website.

We utilize a website. We have a district website, and then each school has their own website. For example, in elementary school, I know there's still a lot of paper that goes home, you know, in middle school, we really don't send a lot of paper home. So, we do morning announcements. And on our morning announcements, we kind of have all the upcoming things like you know, the news: 'Tennis Club is starting soon, if you would like a permission, slip, contact the office by this date.' So, my secretary every morning, then takes the morning announcements and she posts them on our homepage, we have a daily announcement. So, if you're a parent, and you want to know everything that's going on, or whatever the kids heard, you

can go to there and you can see it to where we post, let's say like today, softball baseball got canceled. So that gets posted on the website. (Priscilla)

Therefore, if parents were unable to use the website for its various complications and flaws, then they were missing out on the most important and relevant communication officially posted by the district. School stakeholders were aware of the flaws on the website and were taking steps to create a new user-friendly website with streamlined information. Florence, a school stakeholder, reported just that.

The current website, I guess I could maybe use the word clunky, [about] trying to find information on there. So, we're trying to update it, make it look more modern, make information more streamlined, consistent across each of the building, making sure that the information that's on what elementary schools the same across all of them. (Florence)

The Highlander School District had a plan to revamp the website so that it could become the central communication platform that administration desired it to be. The modernization and accessibility changes aimed to give users a better overall experience and to limit the need for community members to turn to other methods of communication for easy access to formal district correspondence. At the time of this study, school stakeholders did not have a plan for rolling out the new website as they were in the information gathering phase of this project.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, case study was to understand the ways that social media has impacted the school-home communication landscape. Specifically, this study considered how schools engage with social media as a part of communication, both planned and unplanned. One of the things that came from an examination of stakeholder perspectives is the extent to which they still prefer traditional forms of communication. It also explored the ways in which private Facebook groups run by parents in a school community raised awareness or called for changes in policies related to school issues. The stakeholders who participated in this study included community members and school district employees. They reported a range of feelings about the ways in which the district communicates. Some felt the level of communication was appropriate, responsive, and transparent, while others were dissatisfied and felt that information was difficult to find or that more could be done to establish trust with the community. The school stakeholders who participated in this study showed a willingness to adapt to new changes in communication but felt more comfortable with methods of communication that were more traditionally associated with schooling and relied on in-person or one-to-one communication.

Community members shared a variety of reasons for joining online social media communities, the two strongest being that the Facebook Parent Page offered an opportunity for parents to have their voices heard about school issues and it fostered a feeling of belonging within the group. School district stakeholders who utilized social media both personally and professionally shared that in their dual role they felt that simply reading the posts and comments within the social media parent group without actively responding was in itself valuable information regarding topics important to community members. Along with this initial

overview, chapter five provides a discussion of findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

Social media is a communication area that continues to grow in use within organizations. The Highlander School District is no exception. One finding of this study was that social media gives a voice to those community members who might not otherwise be heard. Community members spoke to the importance of the Facebook Parent Page as a place to ask questions of other parents with children in the district. Analysis showed that users who used the group to ask questions about process and calendar items such as the high school parking policy, Kindergarten registration, and music program information were met with multiple responses from across the community. When parents or community members had a school-related question and did not know to whom they might direct their inquiry, the Facebook page provided an arena for their questions to be heard and answered with speed. In this way, the ease and speed of social media were benefits that all community members appreciated.

A few participants spoke about how posting something to Facebook, which garners “likes” and comments can make a commenter feel “heard.” It is as if the very act of getting something off of one’s chest is all that was needed. A conclusion can be made that perhaps some topics do not reach formal channels because, depending on the topic, the mere act of making a social media post and engaging with one’s peers is resolution enough. Another possibility is that the ability to hear other community member thoughts can also help one decide if her issue is important enough to raise through a more formal channel.

Many participants shared that they were members of social media groups, the Highlander School District Parent Page in particular, because of the sense of community they felt as a

member. Not all participants considered themselves active members in the sense that they preferred to read posts rather than create them, but many mentioned that they were interested in reading about topics concerning the schools. Topics related to community events and crowd-sourcing questions were the two topics that were most engaged with according to interviewed community members. Analysis of the social media posts both of district-held accounts and the private social media group curated by parents also showed these topics to be highly prevalent on social media. For instance, posts about sports, club events, and high school related announcements received high numbers of likes and comments. A conclusion can be made that sense of belonging is a motivating factor for individuals seeking community through social media groups.

School stakeholders embraced social media as a place to post and retweet school celebrations, events, and closings. Some administrators reported this as a fast way to communicate to a large number of community members at once. However, administrators had not yet begun to use social media for its community building capabilities in quite the same way that district parents had done. School districts interested in building trust within the community and fostering positive relationships with stakeholders, as this study revealed, would benefit from tapping into the unique community-building capabilities of social media. To do this, districts need to create policies regarding the use of social media for administrators and staff members to use as a roadmap for purposeful school-home communication.

The literature about school-home communication showed the importance of frequent, transparent communication delivered in a way that reaches the intended audience (Epstein, 1995; Baule & Lewis, 2012). District personnel in Highlander School District have sought to better understand their community members and are making an effort to communicate in ways that

engage all members. Baule & Lewis found that parents rely on information conveyed by school personnel as a way to stay abreast of what is happening in schools (2012). My research extends their work by finding that all levels of community members turned to social media, including for informal sources of information, particularly so that they could better support their children in school-related endeavors.

Further, in *The School and Community Relations*, there was discussion around web-based communication and organizations, which was interesting in that Moore, Bagin, and Gallagher (2016) discussed expediency and ease of use as two elements that make e-mail and other mass communication practices attractive to organizations, which was also the case in the Highlander School District. People liked to utilize communication tools with which they had a great degree of comfort.

Another area of interest in this study was to learn more about the formal and informal policies adopted by school districts regarding social media. Findings revealed that The Highlander School District had a policy in place for social media that was found within the larger technology policy that governed acceptable use for staff members and students in the district. The technology policy was recently updated by the district in response to new and changing social media applications. However, when asked about policies that were put in place following social media engagement, neither community members nor school district stakeholders could readily point to an instance where a policy was changed in response to social media commenting or concerns raised by parents through social media. This is an important distinction, as the data reveal that when it comes to student use or recognizable changes in social media use, policies are put into place to monitor and regulate those advances, yet, when it comes to other types of concerns being discussed on social media, change does not occur. Specifically, community

members had the impression that issues that they raise on the Parent and other social media pages were monitored and acted upon by administration, but this was not the case. Only those concerns that were also raised in other more formal channels (such as board of education meetings, e-mails to district administration, in-person meetings) were acted upon by school district administrators.

An informal policy was discussed considering not having a formal policy from the school district, those who work in the schools and also live in the community must decide for themselves how to engage online. The consequence of having no formal district guidance governing social media communication is that individuals must use their own discretion when deciding how or if to engage in online discussions about school related issues.

Participants who held dual roles largely fell into a passive role online. Many school stakeholders who also have school-aged children in the region overwhelmingly responded that they created boundaries when it comes to social media engagement. They revealed that they remain members of the parent group to stay abreast of topics of concern and interest to community members, but they limit their engagement.

In this way, they utilized social media forums as a “pulse check of community thoughts and reactions to district issues. Thus, the lack of a district policy resulted in many individuals developing their own informal policy regarding social media use and engagement. Having a clear policy in place would ensure continuity across district schools and administrators and create cohesion within the districts communication practices. Further, many administrators reported hesitation in utilizing social media for communication as they had a fear of losing control of messaging. A district-wide policy regarding social media would give standards of practice and set an expectation of uniformity, thus helping to ease some of these concerns. The

lack of strong communication policy at the district level has led to administrator apathy when it comes to learning how to utilize evolving communication tools. There is no urgency in bringing communication into the modern realm because there are no policies that support or even encourage the use of social media as a way to engage with the public regarding school matters.

Implications for School Districts

Social media is an increasingly popular form of communication. This research study on the use of social media communication provides important information about the scope of communication available to school districts today. It also explores, the divergent ways in which school and community members are engaging with a variety of social media. Previous research shows that specific, timely, and transparent communication between school and home can have positive effects on students' achievement as well as an increased sense of belonging within the school community (Epstein, 1995; Laho, 2019; Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Additionally, there is a long history of schools seeking to communicate with community stakeholders, and a parent desire for more information about happenings within the school environment (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr, 2015). What this work contributes to the field of education for practitioners is the recognition that school districts must be more purposeful in the use of social media. School districts need embrace a variety of digital platforms and also put in place on-going professional development to ensure that employees will communicate with stakeholders across a range of socially mediated platforms. Additionally, clear policies and written expectations for digital practices must be written and shared widely, so that the community at large and the district has uniform expectations on which to base communication. School districts that value building trust between schools and the community must be clear about

their policies and procedures. This will ensure consistence with messaging and promote a sense of cohesion between schools and personnel within a district.

Digital communication channels create the opportunity for concerns to be raised online. Such channels also provide the chance for all stakeholders to weigh in on school-related issues and have their voices heard. However, administrators and staff members need support in learning how to create social media communities that are supportive of and responsive to the needs of the individuals within the community. Such support and training will help decrease feelings of discomfort regarding evolving social media platforms and will allow schools to communicate with communities in a way that is timely and efficient.

Social media's popularity lies in the fact that users can access content on their own time. Traditional district events, meetings in particular, are often time sensitive, which results in those who are unable to attend in person missing out on key information. To help all community members access district meetings and events it would be helpful to provide transcripts of Board of Education and other important stakeholder/district meetings. The district website would be a good place to post these transcripts. Not all community members are able to attend in person meetings, however, this does not mean that they are disengaged or have apathy towards school and town issues. Providing the information in multiple ways through video recordings and transcripts available to the public allows more community members to opportunity to be informed and express an opinion about community issues. A next logical step would be to find other ways that community members could attend meetings virtually. This would mean including expanded live-streaming options utilizing social media that parents could witness and participate in from afar. This would engage a wider audience than those who can only attend the meetings in person and capitalize on social media tools that promote community involvement.

Suggestions for Further Research

This qualitative case study builds upon prior research that shows that positive communication between school and home can increase student achievement and feelings of connectedness at school (Epstein, 1995) while adding to an understanding of ways that school district stakeholders experience social media and digital communication (Epstein, 1995). One important finding is that when there is a disconnect between the way a message is communicated and an ability of stakeholder to receive the information there are feelings of inadequate communication coming from the district. The Highlander district had acknowledged issues with poor communication and lack of trust by those in the community. A research study on social media in a school district that believes it excels at communication may advance understandings of what types of technology policies are needed by all school districts. The recommendations emerging from this study show the need for districts to create explicit policies regarding social media, including when and how to engage with community stakeholders. Another area for future research should consider surveying cohorts of parents about their preferred modes of digital or traditional communication. Participants in this study made generalizations about what they think parents prefer based on age and life experiences, but this is an area that would benefit from quantitative study. The results of such a study would benefit not only those communicating in the education field, but in all markets where target audiences use social media as a means of staying connected through community messaging.

Another area to further research would be an investigation of schools in a range of socio-economically, and racially diverse areas. The question of access to technology and digital literacy instruction is significant when discussing web-based communication, and this study did not reveal enough information about how persons of low-economic status prefer to communicate

compared to their more affluent counterparts given the homogenous nature of the two communities that make up the school district.

Lastly, stakeholders in the Highlander School District acknowledged a need to improve communication and build trust with the community. Further study into districts that feel they excel in the area of communication might provide further insight and provide opportunities for rich study.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of community members and school stakeholders with respect to social media communication. Community member participants in this study expressed mixed feelings about the merit of using social media as a means of communication. While many see the value in open and timely communication, others were concerned about the sometimes-controversial nature of social media discourse, namely that as passion about a topic increases, so do the responses, which can turn personal or heated. To that point, school stakeholders discussed the importance of engaging with community members with a communication plan that they can control. School stakeholders believed this was necessary so that communication outcomes will be productive and in line with the mission and goals of the school district. These feelings of uncertainty when it comes to social media can make school stakeholders overly cautious when considering how to formally approach social media. However, excluding social media from a communication plan alienates an important group of school community members and has negative impact on the communication landscape as a whole. In order for schools to benefit from the current trend in communication, social media should be made a consciously addressed part of a school district's technology plan.

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Appendix A
Informed Consent
School-Home Communication in the Age of Social Media

This research is being conducted by Samantha Gati-Tisi, a doctoral student at Western Connecticut State University, as part of her dissertation. It is a case study that is interested in the ways that stakeholders including school district administrators, Board of Education members, and community members utilize social media to communicate policy and procedures--both formally and informally.

You are being asked to participate in this study and be interviewed because of the unique perspective and information that you may be able to provide. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face by the researcher and will be approximately 60 minutes in length and audio recorded for later transcription purposes. Only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the actual data. In order to maintain confidentiality of all participants, pseudonyms will be utilized for participants, the School District, and the community under study. Materials related to the study will be kept secure so as to maintain privacy of participants. Additionally, participants are able to withdraw from the study or decline to answer questions with which they are uncomfortable without any penalties or hardships.

Results of this study will be used to understand the ways in which district stakeholders perceive and utilize social media as a form of communication.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the WCSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions concerning the rights of the subjects involved in research studies please contact the WCSU IRB Chair at irb@wcsu.edu and mention Protocol # 1819-111

If you have questions about the study, you may contact me, Samantha Gati-Tisi, at gatitisi001@wcsu.edu or by phone at 203-206-5254 or my University Advisor Dr. Tricia Stewart at stewartt@wcsu.edu. A copy of this consent form is available for your records.

Before proceeding, you agree to the following:

I have read and understand the above consent form and agree to participate in this study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Appendix B
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Administrators

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your role in the school district.
2. In what ways does the school district communicate with parents? (Probe: How do you feel about more traditional modes of communication in contrast with digital communication?)
3. Tell me more about the ways that the district formally communicates through web-based technologies to communicate with parents and the community? (Probe: Informally)
4. How do you use technology in your role with the school district? (Probe: What is your level of comfort? What is your favorite?)
5. What is in place to communicate with families who have a socio economic status that can limit their access to technology?
6. What is the district policy regarding social media usage for administrators and staff as a means of communication with parents and community? (Probe: Are there different levels for admin. Vs. staff? Are there multiple policies? Has the policy evolved over time? If so, what caused this and how has it changed?)
7. What are the district policies for students and the way they access and use social media? (Google Classroom?)
8. Are you aware of an online social media parent groups in your district? (Facebook? Twitter? Other? Region 15 has a parent one but also one for parents of children who receive special education services)
9. In what ways have you seen social media parent groups interact with school related topics?
10. In what ways have topics raised in social media informed or changed the way you communicate with parents and the community? (Probe: can you think of any instances in the district that had to be addressed because of things that were talked about on Social Media? Principal Graduation Speech? Suspension issues? Parking at the HS?)
11. What else do you want me to understand about the ways in which you communicate with parents, particularly through social media or other digital platforms based on what we have discussed today?

Appendix C
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Board of Education

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your role in the school district.
2. In what ways does the school district communicate with parents and community members? (Probe: How do you feel about more traditional modes of communication in contrast with digital communication?)
3. Tell me more about the ways that the district formally communicates through web-based technologies to communicate with the parents and the community? (Probe: Informally)
4. What is in place to communicate with families who have a socio economic status that can limit their access to technology?
5. How do you use technology in your role in the school district? (Probe: What is your comfort level? What is your favorite way to communicate?)
6. In what ways do community members communicate with you? (Probe: Can you share some examples? Have you been surprised by the communications: Facebook? Twitter?)
7. What is the district policy regarding social media usage for administrators and staff as a means of communication with parents and community? (Probe: Are there different levels for admin. Vs. staff? Are there multiple policies? Has the policy evolved over time? If so, what caused this and how has it changed?)
8. Are you aware of an online social medial parent group in your district?
9. In what capacity do you engage with the social media parent group?
10. In what ways have you seen social media parent groups interact with school decision making?
11. What else do you want me to understand about the ways in which the Board communicates with parents, particularly through web-based applications?

Appendix D
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Community Member

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your role in the school district.
2. In what ways does the school district communicate with parents? (Facebook? Twitter?)
3. Tell me about the socio economic status of people you know, do you have concerns about people having equal access to technology and school district shared information?
4. In what ways are parents able to communicate with school?
5. Are you a member of an online social medial parent group? What is your experience with this group. (Probe: topics addressed, types of posts)
6. In what capacity do you engage with the social media parent group? (Probe: What are some topics that have interested you? Concerned you? Have you ever posted a post and had it not accepted by the FB page administrator?)
7. To your knowledge, what policies are currently in place surrounding social media use in schools?
8. Could you reflect on a time that you saw social media parent groups interact with school decisions and protocol and explain it to me? (Probe: A hot or controversial topic; principal graduation speech, snow day for chorus trip and it canceled, etc.)
9. What else do you want me to understand about the ways in which your child's school district communicates with parents and community members?



**Edd in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form**

Student Samantha Gati-Tisi Date 5/26/2020

Dissertation Title: (inter-) Connected: A Case Study of School-Home Communication in the Age of Social Media

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

Tricia J. Stewart, Ph.D. Tricia J. Stewart 05/26/2020
Dissertation Committee Chair Signature Date

Jody S. Piro, Ed.D. Jody S. Piro May 26, 2020
Interim Program Coordinator Signature Date

Joan S. Palladino, Ed.D. Joan S. Palladino May 26, 2020
Interim Dean, School of Professional Studies Signature Date

Christopher Shankle, Ed.D. Christopher Shankle May 26, 2020
Associate Director, Division of Graduate Studies Signature Date