Understanding Communication at Large Suburban High School

A thesis presented

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract 5
Acknowledgements 6

Chapter 1  Introduction
  Statement of Problem 7
  Research Problem 12
  Justification for the Research Problem 14
  Deficiencies in the Evidence 15
  Relating the Discussion to Audiences 16
  Significance of the Research Problem 17
  Research Central Question and Sub-Questions 17
  Theoretical Frameworks 18

Chapter 2  Literature Review
  Introduction 20
  Media Richness Theory 25
  Epstein’s Model of Overlapping Spheres 26
  Epstein’s Theory of Six Types of Parental Involvement 27
  Challenges of Parent Involvement 27
  Summary 28
  Conclusion 28

Chapter 3  Methodology
  Introduction 31
  Purpose Statement 32
  Positionality Statement 32
Chapter 4      Findings

Introduction  41
Research Questions  41
Participant Descriptions and Interviews and Focus Groups  42
Central Office Administrators  43
School Administrators  44
Teachers  45
Parents  47
Analysis  48
Description of Themes  49
Data Tables
Table 1: Administrator themes by sub-questions  50
Table 2: Teacher themes by sub-questions  55
Table 3: Parent themes by sub-questions  59
Table 4: Themes by participant groups  57
Table 5: Components common to all groups, by sub-question  62
Table 6: Components common to two groups, by sub-question  63
Results  64
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Sub-Questions</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 Discussion of Research Findings</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Research</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Permission to Use Site for Research</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: IRB Approval</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Teacher Letter</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Parent Letter</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Administrator E-mail</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Communication issues at Large Suburban High School have been raised by state surveys and accreditation documents.

If effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth and if challenges and opportunities exist, then both the challenges and the opportunities must be examined. Using the theoretical framework of Epstein’s six types of parental involvement (Epstein, 1995), theories of overlapping spheres (Epstein, 2008) and Media Richness theory, (Lendel and Daft, 1989) the exploratory case investigated communication at this school by interviewing district and school administrators, conducting two focus groups with parents and teachers examining documents with the goal of answering the central question; “What is the process by which key stakeholders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents engage in communication?” Communication included oral, electronic and written correspondence between the school administrators, educators, and parents.

Keywords: Communication, parental involvement, high school
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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

“The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.”

This quote is attributed to Sydney Harris, a twentieth century American journalist for the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Chicago Sun Times*. This passage describes some of the challenges and opportunities involving communication at Large Suburban High School (LSHS).

Information in a high school would include the date and time of the next football game or the dates times of the musical production. There is not a high degree of meaning attached to the information, it is something that can be put on a calendar and a decision made whether to attend. A request for a meeting with a parent, teacher or administrator to discuss a student’s academic or behavioral performance is not simply information; it is an invitation to engage in meaningful two-way communication. In a high school transmitting information to parents is not always enough; parents must be actively engaged in communication with school personnel when the topic is student behavior or academic performance. It is not enough to know that a child may fail a class, the parent must engage in meaningful communication to assist the child in making academic progress.

Up through the 2013-2014 school year SurveyWorks! Surveys were required annual surveys offered to every educator, parent and student in the state of Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) conducted these annual surveys of students, parents, teachers/staff, and administrators as part of a coordinated effort to
improve schools. The most recent SurveyWorks! Survey found that, communication between the school and parents at Large Suburban High School is below the Rhode Island state average. For example, 24.7% of the LSHS parents surveyed strongly agreed with the statement: “It is easy for me to communicate with my child’s teachers if I need to”. The state average for the same question was 53.4 % of the parents strongly agreeing with the statement. Large Suburban High School is consistently one of the top five or six ranked schools in the state; therefore the communication concerns are inconsistent with other opinions of the school. The State of Rhode Island classification system categorizes LSHS as a “leading school, meaning that there is “strong achievement in reading and math, small or no gaps between groups of students and improving student achievement” (RIDE). Among the survey’s findings were that 21.5% of the teachers sometimes or never maintain two-way communication between school and home, while 9.1% of the parents felt it is not easy to communicate with the teachers. In addition, 51% of the parents indicated that the school does not contact them about problems with school work and 17.9% of parents feel that the school does not respond quickly to requests or concerns. Some parents also reported not receiving information about financing higher education, counseling, support groups or homework clubs. This is information that parents expect the school to provide. Meanwhile, teachers reported that they rarely communicate to parents when a student does something well and 10% of teachers reported never maintaining active two-way communication with parents.

Endicott College Research Center works with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) to develop surveys that reflect the stated accreditation standards. The Endicott College Survey is designed as a self-study to be taken by parents, educators and students prior to the NEASC accreditation visit. According to the Endicott College Survey taken by members of the LSHS community prior to the NEASC accreditation visit in September 2013,
only 57% of parents reported that they agreed with the statement “The school provides me with a formal report, in addition to course grades, which explains my son's/daughter's progress in achieving school-wide learning expectations.” In other words, the majority of the parents who answered the survey did not receive any communication, other than report cards, on their child’s progress in achieving school-wide learning expectations.

Communication issues do not appear to be isolated to the communication between the school and parents. Communication between teachers and students is also lacking. According to the Endicott College Survey, only 45% of the teachers reported that they communicate to the students the school’s learning expectations and corresponding rubrics. Teachers do not appear to be able to communicate with other educators in the building; only 54% of the teachers surveyed in the SurveyWorks! Survey (2011-2012) reported that they were able to communicate openly with each other and/or the school administration, and only 57% of the teachers felt comfortable communicating with the building principal. This indicates a climate in which communication among adults, even within the school building, is not valued. There is no written communication policy for the entire LSSD or for LSHS.

Because parental involvement tends to decline as the child moves through the education system and communication is one type of involvement centering on the student, it is important that effective communication exists between all stakeholders in the LSHS school community. Less than 25% of the parents reported feeling comfortable contacting their child’s teachers if they felt that it was necessary. This indicates that parent-initiated contact with teachers is perceived to be an accepted practice at LSHS. Communication is a two-way process, if one of the parties does not feel comfortable initiating communication, it is ineffective.
Joyce Epstein, Ph.D. is the Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools, Principal Research Scientist and Research Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. She is well-known for her framework of six types of parental involvement, which includes communication as one of the six ways in which parents can be involved in their child’s education. She also developed the theory of overlapping spheres which describes the interrelating of parents, schools and communities for the education of children. If effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth, as Epstein (2008) states and if challenges and opportunities exist, then both the challenges and the opportunities must be examined.

The statewide surveys, the Endicott College self-study surveys prior to the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) accreditation visit and the report of the visiting NEASC team indicate that communication challenges exist at LSHS. Parents report that it is not easy to communicate with teachers, that the school does not contact them about academic problems and that they do not receive information about various available supports such as financing higher education, counseling, support groups and homework clubs. Many parents report that the school does not respond quickly enough to their requests or concerns. Teachers report that they are not able to communicate with other educators in the building, only about half of them feel they are able to communicate openly with other teachers and the school administration, including the building principal.

It appears that there are some challenges and therefore some opportunities to improve communication at LSHS. However, the issue of ineffective communication must first be investigated. The researcher included central office personnel, school administrators and parents
input in this investigation, as the focus of education is the child; home, school and community all interact with each other to support the child (Epstein, 1995).

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study is to understand the communication challenges and opportunities for LSHS stakeholders including parents, teachers, school administrators, and central office administrators. The school district data manager was interviewed in order to understand Aspen, the student information system and its use as a communication tool. For the purpose of this research, communication is defined according to the International Association of Communication Activists (IACACT) as “the product of the interactants sharing and creating meaning.” This meshes with the International Association for Communication Administration’s definition of the field of communication: “The field of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels and media. The field promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication” (Korn, Morreale, and Boileau, 2000). Communication challenges are defined based on Oxford English Dictionary definition of challenge: “a task or situation that tests someone’s abilities.” i.e. as any element that makes communication difficult or problematic. Communication opportunities are defined based on the definition of opportunity in the Oxford English Dictionary, as “a set of circumstances that make communication possible.” For the purposes of this research, the Social Constructivist view put forth by IACAT- that “communication is the product of the interactants sharing and creating meaning” will be used since it implies a two way communication process.

The central question of this research is: “What is the process by which key stake-holders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents engage in communication?” Six sub-questions ask the stake holders to describe their experiences in general with communication,
positive aspects of communication and challenges to communication and to explain their beliefs about why these challenges exist and what opportunities might be identified to overcome them.

The six sub-questions are:

1 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?

2 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?

3 How do teachers, administrators and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?

4 How do teachers, administrators and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?

5 How do teachers, administrators and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?

6 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?

**Research Problem**

Communication within the LSHS community, including parents, teachers, and administrators, is important. Communication remains one way in which parents remain involved in the child’s education through the high school years. Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence involves schools, here represented by teachers and administrators, as being an essential piece of education, along with parents and the community at large. However, challenges exist that prevent effective communication among the teachers, administrators, and parents at LSHS. The challenges include teachers not feeling comfortable communicating with each other or the building principal, parents feeling that their issues are not addressed in a timely manner and not receiving important information from the school about supports for their students such as
counseling. Improved communication is needed at LSHS as evidenced by the state mandated SurveyWorks! Survey, the Endicott College Survey (which served as LSHS’s self-survey for the NEASC accreditation visit in September 2013), and the NEASC report from the September 2013 visit. Several examples of data from these reports exemplify the perception that communication challenges exist at LSHS. In the SurveyWorks! Report from academic year 2012, teachers reported that they rarely communicate to parents when a student does something well, while 10% of the teachers reported that they never maintain active two-way communication with parents. In addition, the Endicott Survey (which was done in 2012 in preparation of the September 2013 NEASC accreditation visit) indicated that there is a need for improved communication in many areas at LSHS. Under the heading of communication of Teaching and Learning Standard 4, ‘Assessment of and for Learning’ only 56.9% of parents agreed with the statement that “the school provides me with a formal report, in addition to course grades, which explains my son's/daughter's progress in achieving school-wide learning expectations.” The 2013 NEASC report for LSHS also notes several areas in which communication could be improved. The visiting committee recommended that there was a need to “communicate the school’s progress in achieving the school’s 21st-century learning expectations to all students and their families, and to the school community” and “communicate to students prior to each unit of study, the school’s applicable 21st-century learning, expectations and related unit-specific goals to be assessed” (NEASC, 23).

If effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth, as Epstein (2008) states and if challenges and opportunities exist, then both the challenges and the opportunities must be examined. Epstein’s (11), contention that “two-way communicating activities keep families informed about and involved in school programs and students' progress”
merges her six types of parental involvement framework with the theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Communication at LSHS is examined through these lenses.

The purpose of this study was to investigate adult communication at this school. Perceived challenges to effective communication as well as strengths and opportunities to improve the process will be examined. The participants in the research study will include parents, teachers and administrators at LSHS and at the Large Suburban School District (LSSD).

**Justification for the Research Problem**

Why is communication important at LSHS? Why should it be studied? Communication is one way that parents remain involved with their child’s education in high school. Several studies have documented the fall-off in parental involvement over the course of a student’s time in school, decreasing from the early grades through high school (Epstein, 2008; Grolnick, W. S., Kurowski, C. O., Dunlap, K. G., & Hevey, C., 2000; K.; Haythornthwaite, C., & Wellman, B., 1998; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Witte, 2010; Snodgrass, 1991). Parental involvement is associated with more positive academic performance and social competence in school (Kohl, Lenguana, and McMahon, 2000). Joyce Epstein’s model of the six types of parental involvement includes communication as one type of involvement that is retained throughout the child’s school years. If a school does not have effective modes of communication, parents will lose one of the most meaningful ways to remain involved in the child’s education throughout the high school years. Recent evidence from multiple sources indicates that LSHS does a poor job of communicating (Endicott College Survey, 2012; SurveyWorks! Surveys; NEASC, 2013).
Using Epstein’s communication as one type of parent involvement as an indicator, it would appear that LSHS is reflecting the trend of decreasing parental involvement throughout a student’s years of school, as evidenced by previously described communication issues between school and home. Investigating opportunities for improved communication will improve student academic performance, leading to an increased graduation rate, which is one of the factors used to categorize public schools by the state.

Communication challenges at LSHS exist at all levels and among all stakeholders. It is important to investigate the challenges and identify opportunities to improve communication at LSHS.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Various studies have documented the decline in parental involvement as previously noted, but the research is unclear as to whether this is a true drop-off in involvement or if the type of involvement changes over the years. Also, one of the six types of parental involvement as defined by Epstein (1995) is communication. Does the type of communication change over the years or is it a decrease in communication all together? Are there other factors which have presented communication challenges in similar schools? Are there opportunities that can be used to create effective communication among teachers, parents and administrators?

At one time there were deficiencies in the research on parent and school communication. Cattermole and Robinson (1985) reported that “surprisingly little research has been done on home/school communication.” Since then, there has been much additional research in this area, but more is needed. Between 1986 and 1988 the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) investigated characteristics of “promising parental involvement programs” in
their five-state region (Williams, D. L. and Chavkin, N., 1989). SEDL listed seven essential elements common to all of the programs: written policies, administrative support, training, partnership approach, two-way communication, networking and evaluation.

While the current study focuses on communication as an essential aspect of parental involvement at the high school level, the seven aspects can be looked at through the lens of communication. Are these elements present in the communication process at LSHS?

This study adds to the body of research in communication challenges and opportunities at high schools. While this is one large suburban high school in Rhode Island, communication concerns have been noted in high schools in other states and countries.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

A school must have effective communication among all of its stakeholders in order to serve its students, parents and community. High school parents need to have information that allow them to help their sons and daughters make good choices in preparation for graduation and post-high school plans, whether that means work, the military, or continuing education. Educators need parents to communicate concerns and questions to them in order to assist the students in reaching academic goals, specifically high school graduation and post-high school planning. This issue is likely not unique to LSHS and therefore other secondary schools at the state and national levels will benefit from this research. As previously mentioned, several studies have indicated that this is a concern in other countries, as well. Therefore, there is an interest in this research internationally.

Exploring communication at LSHS places the researcher in the position of a change agent as the researcher investigates communication challenges and opportunities and works with
school leadership to make effective communication at this high school a priority. Lessons learned will be shared with the school and community.

**Significance of Research Problem**

This research is important at the local, state and national levels due to the importance of communication required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Effective communication between school and parents is one way of enabling parents to be involved in their child’s education (Epstein, 1995). Parent involvement affects academic performance and social competence in school. Therefore it is imperative for parents to remain involved in their child’s education throughout their school years. One of the ways in which parent involvement can be retained throughout the high school years is through effective communication. This issue is not limited to the United States; research in other countries has shown a similar trend, thus making this an international interest (Hornby & Witte, 2010).

**Research Central Question and Sub-Questions**

Central Question: What are the experiences of teachers, administrators, and parents with communication at LSHS?

Sub-questions:

1. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?
2. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?
3. How do teachers, administrators and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?
4. How do teachers, administrators and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?
5. How do teachers, administrators and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?
6. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?
Theoretical Frameworks

The importance of communication between schools and student’s homes has been known for many years. One theoretical framework that helps put this complex relationship into perspective is Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1995). This model (Diagram 1) shows the interlocking of responsibilities of school, home, and community in relationship to the education of the child. At the most local level, the community is represented by the school board. Educating the child is an endeavor encompassed by all three spheres. It is essential that these three components have effective communication within and among themselves in order for the child to thrive.

Diagram 1 Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence

A second framework is Epstein’s six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). The focus of this study is the parental involvement of communication. According to Epstein(1995) schools need to design effective forms of two-way
communication between school-to-home and home-to-school about school programs and children’s progress. Epstein additionally recommends annual conferences with every parent, utilizing language translators to assist families if necessary. In order to keep parents involved in the child’s education Epstein suggests that a regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications should be sent to parents.

The third theoretical framework is called “media richness theory” (Lendel and Daft, 1989), which comes from the field of communication and states that for effective communication to occur, both the senders and the receivers must be able to achieve meaning. According to Lendel and Daft (1989), “the physical characteristics of a medium limit the kind and amount of information that can be conveyed.” This concept is important due to the variety of forms of communication that are typically used, such as written, visual and electronic. Media Richness Theory may explain why different media are more or less effective in communicating at different times to different people. In order for communication to be effective, all parties must achieve meaning in both sending and receiving communication.

I studied the problem of improving school communication through these frameworks: Epstein’s framework of overlapping spheres, at which the child is the center, but community, school and home all have a vested interest and influence on the child; Epstein’s communication as a type of parental involvement; and media richness, which emphasizes that both the sender and the receiver should meaning. These frameworks focused the investigation of communication challenges and opportunities at LSHS.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth. Furthermore, it is required by federal law. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was the 2002 update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB requires schools to organize programs of parental involvement and to communicate with parents about the quality of their children’s schools as well as student achievement. Section 118 Parental Involvement of NCLB requires that schools develop an annual plan for how parents, school staff and students share responsibility for improved academic achievement. In addition to delineating school responsibility for providing a high-quality curriculum and parent responsibilities for supporting children’s education, there is a requirement to address the importance of regular, on-going communication between parents and the school. The communication includes a minimum of annual parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools, frequent reports on student progress and “reasonable access to staff”.

Researchers have studied effective communication in schools over the years. Cattermole and Robinson (1985) conducted a quantitative study in British Columbia asking parents to choose how they actually learned about their children’s schools versus how they preferred to learn about their children’s schools. In both cases, they relied on information directly from their children and preferred to learn directly from them. The findings of this study were that “if schools really want to communicate more effectively with parents, they have only to develop
more fully the traditional modes of home/school communication that rely on direct, personal
contact between educators and parents.”

Traditional school communications such as notes sent home announcing book fairs, face-to-face meetings such as annual parent-teacher conferences, and phone calls about a teacher concern have been routine for many years. However, with the advent of the school information systems, home-school communication has changed in the last thirty years with the added potential of parents, teachers and administrators using such systems to communicate with each other as well as for schools to transmit information that does not require engagement or a high level of meaning, such as the dates of the school musical. Thus student information systems must be included as a possibility for home-school communication in addition to the traditional face-to-face meetings and phone calls.

Herrera and Wooden (1988) carried out an ethnographic study to investigate reading and writing practices among adult immigrant parents of elementary students. Findings indicated a significant discrepancy between the school’s purposes of communicating with parents and the parents’ perceptions of the purpose of school communication. The implication of this study was that promoting parental involvement in children’s education requires effective communication, given that parents have expectations for their children’s education based on their own school experiences. Important changes to education need to be communicated to parents; they need to be given specific, detailed information in order to make the best decisions for their children. In addition, parents need to know their opinions are valued and will be considered when making educational decisions affecting their children.
Olmstead (2013) used a mixed-methods approach to answer the question “how does teacher communication through the use of technology promote parent involvement in their children’s academic lives?” Olmstead found that 91% of the parents surveyed felt that it was important that the school provided a means for communicating with families through technology. She also found that for quick exchanges of information, such as school updates or questions that need a “yes” or “no” answer e-mail, phone messages, and fliers were the preferred method of communication for both parents and teachers. When communicating about student performance or behavior in-person or phone communication was preferred by both parents and teachers.

Communication is an important skill for teachers and administrators at all levels from classroom teachers to school district administrators. The importance of communicating with parents is acknowledged by professional associations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA).

Communication is an important part of an educator’s job at all levels. School and district administrators are certified through various programs that adhere to leadership standards. The Council of Chief State School Officers, with input from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, publishes Leadership Policy and Practice Standards, which are the basis for state education leadership policies. Educational Leadership Policy Standards embed communication throughout these standards. For example, Standards 4C and D, which relate directly to family and community relationships, state that the educational leader “builds and sustains positive relationships with families and caregivers” and “builds and sustains productive relationships with community partners” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 15).
As a parent, communicating with schools-especially teachers—is important. The National PTA website offers tips for parents on effective communication with teachers, including e-mail, phone calls, and written notes. Some of the tips, such as

Write short notes (written or as an e-mail, if allowed) and follow up with a phone message to the school if you don’t get a response in a few days. Be sure to include your phone number and/or e-mail address.

are good rules of thumb for all communications. Others are more specific to the instructional setting, such as “provide information that will help the teacher get to know your child as an individual. Include relevant information such as allergies, behavior issues (tendency to be distracted, for instance), learning issues, or changes in family life.”

The National Education Association (NEA) is the largest public employee organization in the United States. Its members include teachers at all levels from pre-kindergarten through college. NEA recognizes the importance of teachers maintaining effective communication with families. In a Policy Brief (NEA 2008), the association addresses the need to involve parents in their children’s education, including entering into two-way communication with students’ families while recognizing that parent involvement declines rapidly once students reach middle school.

Communication is an important element in family and school relationships, whether it is between parents and teachers, parents and administrators, or administrators and teachers. But what exactly is meant by the term “communication?” The term comes from the Latin word, “communicare”, which means “to share” or “to make common” (Bagin, Gallagher & Moore, 74). “Communication” is a word with many meanings, even within a large international organization
such as IACACT. These definitions range from the straightforward transmission model of simply sending and receiving messages to the more complicated social constructivist model which involves the interactants sharing meaning.

Communication issues at LSHS have been noted for at least three years in required state surveys by parents, teachers and students. The accreditation report from the 2013 visiting team from NEASC cited communication issues that must be dealt with before the next visit in 2023. The recommendations delivered by the visiting team include:

1. Communicate the school’s progress in achieving the school’s 21st century learning expectations to all students and their families, and to the school community
2. Communicate to students prior to each unit of study the school’s applicable 21st century learning expectations and related unit-specific goals to be assessed
3. Improve the communication to the teachers of the connection between current mandates such as the implementation of the new teacher evaluation plan and common Core implementation and teaching and learning
4. Ensure that all families of at-risk students are informed about available support services
5. Ensure the timely delivery of Individualized Education Program (IEP) information to all teachers of students with IEPs
If effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth, as Epstein (2008), the National PTA, and the Council of Chief State School Officers states, and if challenges and opportunities exist, then both the challenges and the opportunities must be examined. The challenges and opportunities for improved communication at LSHS were investigated through the frameworks of media richness and Epstein’s models of overlapping spheres and six types of parent involvement. Each will be discussed in a section of this review. The connection between these three topics is that effective communication is essential for student growth and achievement; the responsibility for educating a child is borne by the parents, school and community at large; and the medium used for communication depends upon the intended message to be delivered, and that meaning must exist for both the sender and receiver (Epstein, 1995, 2008; Lendel & Daft, 1989).

There are several models of communication according to the communication framework theory as expressed by the IACACT. One, the Social Constructivist view, “considers communication to be the product of the interactants sharing and creating meaning.” An opposing view of communication, the Transmission Model, perceives communication as “robotic and computer-like,” simply a way of sending and receiving messages without concern for creation of meaning. For this research, the Constructionist View is used as a model because it acknowledges the interacting of humans and sharing of thoughts and ideas. (http://www.iacact.com/?q=commfwk).

**Media Richness Theory**

According to Lendel and Daft (1989), there is a hierarchy of richness to media, with face-to-face being the richest and most effective and general documents and bulk mailings being the
leanest and least effective. In the 21st century, schools must look at the ubiquitous nature of
technology and communication. The school web site must take into consideration that the school
website is not a print communication placed on the web site. Bagin, Gallagher and Moore (2008)
offer insight as to how school web pages can be used as an effective means to communicate
information to parents and the community (244-252). Delivering information is quite different
from engaging in meaningful two-way communication. Media richness theory would categorize
school web sites as a lean method of communication. Using technology as a means of enhancing
communication does not necessarily make it richer or more meaningful.

An investigation of communication at LSHS included looking at media richness. Parents,
teachers and administrators spoke to the use of both technology and non-technology forms of
communication at LSHS. What types of communication are commonly used by parents, teachers
and administrators? How effective is communication at LSHS?

**Epstein’s Model of Overlapping Spheres**

Epstein (2008) created the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the school, parents
and the community in which the child is the center. The premise is that all three parts are
important in the education of the child. Because all three components are essential to the
education of the child and effective communication is a type of parental-school-community
involvement, the researcher considered all three components of the model but focused on the
parents and school. The researcher acknowledges the importance of the community in educating
children. It is vital for education; however, for the purposes of focusing the study to the
communication issues that arose in the state required and accreditation surveys as well as the
NEASC accreditation report, the researcher did not include the role of the community in the research.

**Epstein’s Theory of Six Types of Parent Involvement**

Joyce Epstein (1995) developed a framework for six types of parent involvement in education through the school years. Communication is one of the six types. These six types of involvement are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. Epstein (1995) challenges schools to “design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to school communication about school programs and children’s progress”. Sample practices include annual parent conferences with every parent every year, translators to assist families if necessary, parent and/or student pick-up of report cards and a conversation about improving grades as needed. She also emphasized the need for clear information about school policies and activities within schools. Challenges she addressed included readability and quality of written materials and the needs of parents for language translation. As a result of many communication channels between the school and parents, expected results were anticipated for parents, students and teachers. For example, students would be expected to become aware of their own progress, parents would be expected to monitor student progress and teachers would be expected to increase the diversity and use of communications with families.

**Challenges of Parent Involvement**

Parental involvement changes over a child’s education. One of the communication challenges at all levels is to provide information to parents who are not able to attend meetings. Parents may have work schedules that prevent in person meetings. Another challenge is that the
schools do not always provide information in clear and understandable language, both written and orally, to all parents, including providing interpreters for parents who speak a different language (Epstein, 2010).

An NEA policy brief (NEA, 2008) cites several reasons that parents may not feel comfortable engaging in two-way communication with the schools. Parents may have negative feelings from their own prior education experiences and may hesitate to engage in communication with the school. In addition, information may be difficult to understand due to the use of educational jargon.

Roadblocks to parent involvement include logistical reasons such as lack of time and money, lack of information, differences in perceptions and values and issues with school facilities (Chadwick, 2004). Some strategies that schools have used to overcome barriers to parent involvement include providing transportation to schools, providing child care at school events, making teachers available for meetings outside of school hours, using multiple modalities for communication, translating communications in all languages spoken in homes, and creating warm, inviting environments (Chadwick, 2004; Bagin, D., Gallagher, D.R. & Moore, E. H., 2008).

The roadblocks to parent involvement through effective two-way communication must be removed by schools in order to make communication between home and school dependable and effective. Before the roadblocks can be removed, they must first be identified. The research identified challenges as well as opportunities for improved communication at LSHS.
Summary

The literature review included literature about communication in general, media richness theory, which outlines a hierarchy of the most effective, richer modes of communication as compared to less effective, leaner modes. A literature review of the roles of the parents and schools has reinforced the importance of parent involvement throughout the school years, while pointing out that this involvement declines over the school years. One of the ways in which high school parents can remain involved in their child’s education is through effective two-way communication.

Conclusion

Communication is essential to student achievement. Two-way communication with schools is one of the ways in which parents can maintain involvement during the high school years. LSHS has been presented with an opportunity to review the findings of the investigation of communication challenges and the opportunities that currently exist. The literature has revealed some barriers and possible ways to remove or minimize them. Some of these may already be in place at LSHS, and some may be possible solutions to challenges at the school.

An exploratory case study with document review, two different focus groups- one for parents and one for teachers- as well as individual interviews with five administrators (two district administrators and three school administrators) will provide the research to answer the overarching question, “What is the process by which key stakeholders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents engage in communication?” The answers to the six sub-questions will provide data to the researcher. The sub-questions are:

1. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?
2. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?
3. How do teachers, administrators and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?
4. How do teachers, administrators and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?
5. How do teachers, administrators and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?
6. How do teachers, administrators and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?
Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Communication within Large Suburban High School is important. However, challenges exist that prevent effective communication among the teachers, administrators and parents at LSHS. In state-mandated Survey Works! surveys teachers reported that they rarely communicate to parents when a student does something well, while 10 per cent of teachers reported that they never maintain active two-way communication with parents. Improved communication is needed at LSHS as evidenced by the state mandated SurveyWorks! Survey, the Endicott College Survey and the NEASC report from the September 2013 visit. In addition, the Endicott College Survey, which was done in 2012 in preparation of the September 2013 NEASC accreditation visit, indicated a need for improved communication in many areas at LSHS, both within the school and between the school and parents.

If effective communication is essential for student achievement and growth as Epstein (2008) reports and if challenges and opportunities exist, then both the challenges and the opportunities must be examined. The challenges and opportunities were identified through document examination, two different focus groups- one for parents and one for teachers- as well as individual interviews with two district administrators (the superintendent of schools and the district data manager), and three school administrators (the interim principal, the assistant principal for teaching and learning, and the interim principal’s administrative intern).
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate communication among teachers, parents, and administrators at LSHS. For this research, communication is defined using the Socialist Constructivist view as “the product of the interactants sharing and creating meaning” since this definition implies a two way communication process (IACAT).

Positionality Statement

Having been a parent, teacher and administrator in this school for over thirty years the researcher is aware of the need for good school-to-home communication. The researcher has been on the receiving end of poor communications from parents and other educators during this time and has wondered if she has always been an effective communicator. The researcher believes that good communication is essential to every school. A school must have effective communication among all of its stakeholders in order to serve the students, parents and community.

The researcher has recently retired from teaching and administrating at LSHS. Her most recent position was that of Assistant Principal for Management and Operations. In addition to overseeing the day-to-day discipline of the students through the disciplinary deans, the researcher also evaluated a third of the teachers. Because she is now retired, she believes that she is in a unique position to research this issue at LSHS. She is well aware of the communication issues at the school, has well-established relationships with the staff and is no longer in a power position due to the title of administrator or the fact that she previously evaluated teachers.
Research Design

Challenges and opportunities to communication at LSHS were investigated through a qualitative study. The end result was an exploratory case study. Written data was be gathered through the examination of existing published documents, including the annual Rhode Island Department of Education survey reports, SurveyWorks!, the NEASC 2013 report of the visiting committee to LSHS and the Endicott Survey (the self-study report of LSHS) leading to the 2013 accreditation visit. In addition to examining already existing data, teachers and parents were invited to participate in one of the one-hour long focus groups. One focus group was for teachers and one was for parents. The three building administrators and two central office administrators were invited to participate in individual one-hour interviews.

Participants

At the time of the study, LSHS had a student population of approximately 1407 students, 147 teachers and two administrators and one administrative intern. Teachers include guidance counselors, classroom teachers, media center specialists, the school-nurse teacher, the psychologist, the social worker, and the disciplinary deans. In addition to teachers and parents of LSHS being invited to participate in two different focus groups --one for parents and one for teachers-- the researcher invited two central office administrators- the superintendent of schools and the school department data manager- as well as the principal, the assistant principal and an aspiring principal intern to participate in individual one-hour semi-structured interviews. The
purposeful sampling could have resulted in the voices of up to 26 participants in the study, however only thirteen individuals answered the invitation to participate.

Recruitment and Access

The researcher asked and was granted permission by both the superintendent of Large Suburban School District and the principal of LSHS to access the teachers, administrators and parents of LSHS. This permission was granted with the understanding that a pseudonym would be used for the high school and the school district. For the purpose of this study the school is Large Suburban High School (LSHS) and the school district is Large Suburban School District (LSSD). Permission was be obtained from Northeastern University’s IRB panel to conduct the study.

Teacher participants were recruited through an internal e-mail inviting teachers to participate in a focus group concerning communication within LSHS and with parents of LSHS students.

Parent participants were recruited through a weekly newsletter sent electronically. The Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and the Boosters’ Club, an organization of sport team supporters, have extensive electronic list servs, and were also approached to send out requests for parent participants. In addition, the principal was asked to put out the request through the school’s Twitter account. Parents answered the invitation to participate through the list serv and weekly newsletter, but not the Twitter account.
Administrators were recruited through individual e-mails to participate in a one-hour interview at a time and place of the administrator’s convenience.

Recruitment materials, including e-mails, have been placed in the Appendices as well as a copy of the IRB consent form.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

All participants were asked to sign an informed consent document. This explained that the risk was minimal and that they could withdraw consent at any time. The researcher’s contact information was provided along with instructions on how to withdraw from the study. No information linking an individual participant to the study will be revealed at any point prior to, during or after the completion of the study. During interviews and focus group discussions each participant was identified only by general descriptions such as “Mr. Carpenter, a parent.” Only the researcher knows the identities of the participants, and care was exercised to prevent any identifying information from entering the report.

**Data Collection**

According to Creswell (2013), the four types of qualitative data are observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. The researcher interviewed central office administrators and school administrators in one-on-one settings and conducted two separate focus groups, one for teachers and one for parents. Gray (2009) explains that focus groups can be an inexpensive way of collecting data in a timely manner. The researcher used structured, open-ended questions for the administrator interviews and focus groups. She also reviewed documents, such as the required annual state survey, the Endicott Collee Survey (the self-report of LSHS in preparation for the NEASC visit to the school in 2013), and the report of the NEASC visiting
committee. In addition, other documents, such as the School Improvement Plan, which includes a communication goal, were examined.

The researcher collected data in the form of interview notes and audio-recordings from the focus group and one-on-one interviews. Information from the written reports which is pertinent to the study was included. All data was combined and used in the final report. The researcher endeavored to understand the communication process at LSHS through the eyes of the administrators, parents and teachers.

The researcher took written notes and taped the interview and focus group sessions, with participant permission granted in writing prior to the beginning of the interview or focus group. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of the right to withdraw at any time in writing. A blank copy of the informed consent form is included in the Appendix of the final report.

The researcher developed an interview guide with questions that were a subset of the research questions directing the study. The interview guide is included in the Appendix of the final report. The researcher conducted a pilot test of the interview questions with a small panel to determine if the questions were written in a form understandable for to both the participant and the researcher. The members of the panel were not the participants in the interviews or the focus groups. The individual interviews of administrators were held in their individual offices. The focus group for educators was conducted after school hours in the media center at LSHS. The parent focus group was also conducted in the media center, which the school frequently uses for parent meetings.

The timeline for data collection began after IRB approval.
The researcher interviewed five adults in administrative or supervisory roles; two central office administrators (the superintendent and the district data manager, who is in charge of the student information system); and three school administrators (the principal, assistant principal and the aspiring principal intern).

The researcher conducted two separate focus groups for adults, one for teachers and one for parents. The focus groups were conducted at separate times.

The researcher reviewed the three documents related to the recent NEASC accreditation visit; the self-study, the Endicott Survey, and the report of the visiting committee. In addition to these documents the researcher examined documents mentioned in the interviews and focus groups. After the researcher received IRB approval, the anticipated time line was anticipated as follows.

- Obtaining participants: two weeks
- Focus groups: within two weeks of determining participants
  - One teacher focus group 90 minutes, but the researcher blocked out two hours for a “cushion”
  - One parent focus group 90 minutes, but the researcher blocked out two hours for a “cushion”
- Individual interviews: two weeks
  - Three school administrators
  - Two central office administrators
- Examining documents: two weeks
- Writing the report: three weeks
Data Storage

Data was in the form of recordings, written transcripts and written notes. All data was stored in a dedicated, locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. Only the researcher had the key to the file cabinet. The data will be destroyed when the research report has been completed. No names or identifying characteristics that can trace the identity of the participants will be associated with the stored data.

Data Analysis

According to Gray (2009, p. 252) “the case study method requires multiple sources of evidence.” The researcher collected data through many sources, including interviewing school and central office administrators, conducting two separate focus groups (one for teachers and one for parents), and examining documents, including surveys and accreditation reports.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. Thomas (2006) outlined procedures for inductive analysis of qualitative dating which the researcher followed. The procedures were data cleaning, close reading, creation of categories, overlapping coded and uncoded text, and continuous revision of the category system.

The researcher tape-recorded the interviews and focus group discussions and also took field notes. In addition, the researcher kept a reflexive journal during the process of the study. The researcher is retired from the Large Suburban School District and as Creswell (2013) points out, reflexivity has two parts (p. 216), talking about the experiences with the phenomenon being studied and discussing how this experience shaped the researcher’s interpretation. The researcher incorporated a discussion of her thoughts, biases and experiences into the writing of the report.
Coding process

The researcher interviewed three school administrators and two central office administrators for a total of five individual one-hour interviews. In addition, she conducted two individual focus groups, one for teachers and one for parents. Each focus group lasted one hour. There were four teacher participants in one focus group. Two parents attended the parent focus group and two additional parents participated through e-mail responses to same questions asked in the focus groups and interviews. In addition to interviews the researcher examined documents including the required annual state surveys for the last three years, the self-assessment report (Endicott College Survey) for the recent accreditation visit, accreditation and the NEASC report of the visiting committee.

During the first round of coding, the researcher employed Attribute Coding. Saldana (2009) states that Attribute Coding is “good qualitative data management and provides essential participant information and contexts for analysis and interpretation.” The researcher also engaged in Descriptive Coding, as Saldana (2009) refers to Wolcott’s assertion that “Description is the foundation for qualitative inquiry and its primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what you heard.” Due to the fact that thirteen individual participants orally responded to the questions, In Vivo coding was used, as it honors participants’ voices (Saldana, 2009). The researcher recognized that before a second cycle of coding happens, recoding may need to be employed so in order to better represent the data. Saldana (2009) states that the primary goal of the second cycle of coding is to develop a sense of categorical, theoretical, thematic or conceptual organization from the codes obtained in the first round. As reported by Saldana (2009), Mikes and Huberman state that Pattern Coding is appropriate as a second cycle
of coding for “the search for rules, causes and explanations in the data.” The researcher employed this method because she is investigating the communication issues at LSHS.

Validity was ensured in this research by triangulation of data from multiple sources. (Creswell 2013) Interviews and focus groups yield different information than examining surveys and reports. In addition to triangulation, Creswell (2009) delineates other strategies that can be used in ensuring the validity of the findings. The researcher incorporated member checking by conducting follow-up interviews, both in-person and via e-mail and recapping the information from the focus groups. In addition, the researcher introduced herself as a former administrator. The researcher also discussed any contradictory evidence that arose as a result of this study. She used thick, rich description in the report. These strategies help ensure the validity of this research.

**Limitations**

The limitation to this study is that one large suburban high school in one state is the focus; therefore the findings may not be transferable to other schools. However, the researcher is confident that the lessons learned in this case study adds to the body of knowledge of school communication. Creswell (2009) states that one limitation to focus groups and interviews is that information is filtered through the perception of the participants. Interviews and focus groups will add more data to the published reports and other forms of data that will be examined for this case study. This data can only be gained through personal interactions.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to understand the communication challenges and opportunities for LSHS stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and central office administrators. Two separate focus groups were conducted, one for teachers and one for parents. Five individual interviews were conducted with district and school administrators. The same open-ended questions were asked in the focus groups and the interviews.

Research Questions

The central question of this research is: “What is the process by which key stakeholders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents, engage in communication?” Six sub-questions ask each of the stakeholders to describe their experiences with communication in general, including positive aspects of communication and challenges to communication, and explain their beliefs about why these challenges exist and which opportunities might exist to overcome them. The six sub-questions are:

1. How do teachers, administrators, and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?
2. How do teachers, administrators, and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?
3. How do teachers, administrators, and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?
4. How do teachers, administrators, and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?
5. How do teachers, administrators, and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?
6. How do teachers, administrators, and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?
Participant Descriptions and Interviews and Focus Groups

Large Suburban High School is located in southern New England. At the time of the research, the high school student population was 1,407. There were 147 teachers on staff. As well as three building administrators, an acting principal, a newly-appointed assistant principal and a principal’s intern from the Principal’s Residency Program run by Johnson and Wales University. The following is a description of the participants in the study. They range from parents and guardians of high school students to teachers representing the fine and performing arts, business, and social studies, to district and school administrators.

The interviews were conducted in the individual offices of the administrators at times chosen by them. The teacher focus group was conducted one afternoon after school in the media center at a time when no other group was scheduled to be using the room. The parent focus group was also held in the media center, early one evening, also at a time during which no other groups were meeting in that location.

Interviews were conducted with three school administrators: the interim principal, the assistant principal, and the interim principal’s intern who was a former department head as well as two central office administrators, the superintendent and the school department data manager. Two different focus groups were conducted, one for teachers and one for parents.

All participants were given pseudonyms. All participants described what they perceived the communication process at LSHS to be, the positive aspects of the communication process, the challenges they perceived, how the challenges could be addressed and the opportunities to improve communication at the school.
Central Office Administrators

Dr. Thomas, the superintendent of schools in Large Suburban School District had been superintendent for five years. His perceptions were the most global, describing his communications with the entire community, including school committee members, school administrators, teachers, and parents. “From the superintendent's perspective, I do a lot of communicating through email with the staff. I do a lot of communicating to the community through list serves and through our website. Those things range from emergency notices about snow cancellations to major announcements about what's happening at school committee meetings.” The bi-monthly school committee meetings agendas are placed on the school website and sent to interested parties through e-mail. The agendas include routine business as well as special reports such as the annual presentation of standardized test results for the district. LSSD website has links to the school committee, each individual school, resources for parents, and to topics of general interest, such as the seasonal flu clinics. He did admit that personal communication is preferred at all times; “I would say face-to-face is the most important...period...for everything.”

Ms. Harris, the school department data manager, spoke about Aspen, the student information system, the history of the use of student information systems in the district, and specifically how the software could be used for communication. “Our school district went to Aspen as a student information system approximately 4 to 5 years ago. We moved from one that was outdated. So what is held in Aspen? It would be all the student demographics, transcript records, parent contacts, conduct, and attendance.” She described how it could be used for communication. “Emailing through Aspen is very, very convenient for a teacher, so using history
as an example again, and period 1, if the teacher, Mr. Smith wants to send home a notice because period 1 is doing something special, a special assignment or presentation, he can just go to the roster and simply option ‘send email’ and it will send it to those students or, he could check off to the parents, too, so the parents are notified if you want to invite the parents to the special presentation.”

School Administrators

Ms. Anderson, the interim principal, had been named interim principal earlier in the school year when the principal left to take a position in a different school system. She was the assistant principal for teaching and learning for two years prior to her appointment as interim principal. She had worked in private business, at the college level and had been a secondary school teacher for ten years prior to becoming an administrator. One of the things that she changed when she became interim principal was the way she communicates with the staff. “This past January, the listserv has changed, and is now called the Friday Focus. We can add graphics; it's on a blog now. So there's graphics and links and all kinds of things that you can celebrate going on in the school. I've only done 3 now, but I think it's a better way to showcase community.”

This was the first year as an administrator for Ms. Hamilton, the assistant principal. She had previously been a teacher for fifteen years at LSHS and a department head. From her perspective, the communication is good. “I think we have good communication at the high school. As far as communicating with faculty within the building and administration, we use a lot of face-to-face, email; we share Google documents that are working documents, not just something put out there but something that people can comment on, participation in the
formulation.” Face to face meetings include monthly faculty meetings, weekly Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) meetings and weekly Common Planning Time (CPT) meetings. All faculty attend the monthly faculty meetings. The Instructional Leadership Team consists of department heads, building administrators, senior project coordinators and the Common Core Assessment coordinator. In addition to the built in e-mail through the Aspen student information system, LSSD has a separate e-mail for use by all faculty and staff.

Ms. Waters was a part time teacher and was fulfilling the requirements for an administrative certificate by interning with the interim principal. She was able to give her perception from the standpoint of a teacher as well as an administrator in training. She admitted that while personal communication is best, she often relies on technology for communicating. “We utilize a variety of modalities to communicate. Always, interpersonal is the best when you can face-to-face with people. We also highly rely upon our Aspen student information system for email. I use that quite frequently.”

Teachers

The four teachers who participated in the teacher focus group were from three different academic departments; the fine and performing arts, business, and social studies.

Of the four teachers, Mr. Brown, a business teacher who had retired from a Fortune 500 company career, had been teaching the least amount of time (four years). He spoke about communication from both an educational and business point of view. “Technology has given us a lot of capability in communicating both formally and informally. Most of the time
communicating with teachers is if I see them in the hallway, or when they stop by to visit or I'll stop by to visit, but a lot of it's done through email.”

Ms. Paine, an art teacher with fifteen years of experience, spoke of frustrations with technology, especially regarding communication with parents. “I just found out how to use Aspen to email a group of people last week because, usually, I do so many shows and then I individually email those parents and then if they can't get there I take pictures of the shows and email it to the parents. I make sure I put images of the shows on the school TV, the LSHS high school Web page, the Large Suburban School District Web page, I mass email. I'm trying to hit like everything.” The school has a television studio that is used for filming daily announcements as well as for special projects for that range from student made public service announcements to presentations by teachers and administrators on special topics such as senior project announcements.

Ms. Martin, a music teacher with twenty years of experience, spoke of inadequacies of technology across the school and frustrations with the use of technology for communication. “One of the other challenges that I'd like to bring up is the inconsistency of the availability to work...the technology...today I was trying to get something done that should have taken maybe five or ten minutes...but for whatever reason, my computer was running as slow as Moses and I couldn't get it done...you can't count on it.”

Ms. Jones, a social studies teacher for twenty years spoke of the positive use of social media for communication and initiating discussion among her students during non-school hours. “So I'll have kids email me a couple of times a day or ask a question maybe they didn't ask in the classroom because they're a little shy or something, they'll come back to me a day or two later
and they'll say, ‘Hey, Ms. Jones, when you talked about this you know I thought something about that or talked to my grandma,’ and I have these wonderful conversations on-line or ‘what was that movie you said I should watch on the British home front?’ The conversations evolve naturally through that area so for some kids their comfort level might be I don't want to talk to you in class but I want to email you on the side and I respond and they like that.”

Parents

Two parents participated in a small focus group and two parents answered the questions via e-mail because they could not attend the focus group meeting, but were interested in participating in the research. Both of the parents who participated through e-mail contacted the researcher to ask if they could participate through e-mail due to their feelings that communication is an important issue and due to scheduling conflicts with the chosen date for the focus groups.

Mr. Carpenter, the father of a tenth grade girl, was satisfied with the little communication he had from the school, stating that the only phone call he ever received from the school was when he was contacted by the nurse’s office. “I have had the clinic staff call me directly when they were concerned about my child. I know they genuinely are concerned for her well-being.”

Ms. Baker, the mother of a ninth grade student had concerns about the lack of communication from teachers and guidance when her son was having academic difficulties. “Parents should not receive a letter after report cards are sent that their child is at risk of failing a class. This should be a phone call prior to the quarter end.”
Ms. Colt, the parent of a senior boy was completely comfortable with using technology as a means of communication, although she understood that not all parents were comfortable. “You might not get information on a timely basis or not be able to easily retrieve it when you need it. I can see how that would be a challenge. Again, I'm at my computer all the time so it works for me. But I can see how it could NOT be the case for someone.”

Ms. Hutchins, the custodial guardian of her granddaughter, spoke to the need of teachers and administrators to use the telephone to contact parents and guardians instead of relying so much on technology for communication. “I'm from the old school and I think you should return all messages within 24 hours. If I can take the time to make the call, the person that I'm calling should be able to take the time to make the call. I'm not always at my computer. I'm old school and I sit at home waiting for that phone call.”

**Analysis**

This qualitative, exploratory case study sought to answer the question “what is the process by which key stakeholders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents engage in communication?”

In order to answer this central question, six sub-questions were developed and asked of all the participants. The questions were developed to discover the participants’ perceptions of the overall communication process at the school (sub-question 1), the participants’ perception of positive aspects of the communication process at the school (sub-question 2), the participants’ perceptions of challenges that exist with the communication process at the school (sub-question 3), the participants’ perceptions of why the challenges exit at the school (sub-question 4), the participants’ perceptions of how the challenges can be addressed (sub-question 5) and the
participants’ perceptions of opportunities that exist to improve communication at the school (sub-question 6).

The researcher looked at the answers to each of the six sub-questions from each group of participants, the teachers, the parents and the administrators. The researcher looked at answers within each group and across groups in order to determine common themes. The themes are described below.

**Descriptions of themes:**

- **Audience:** people involved in or who have an interest in the students at LSHS, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community (residents and taxpayers) of the LSSD
- **Direct Contact:** communication intended for a single destination, phone call or mail
- **Expectations:** one party expects a specific behavior from another party
- **Frequency:** how often something occurs, i.e., daily, weekly, or “as needed”
- **Human component:** a component related to humans, such as emotion
- **Infrastructure:** hardware and software relating to technology
- **Misinformation:** rumors or conflicting information
- **Multiple modalities:** variety of forms of communication: personal, face-to-face, electronic, personal, visual, etc.
- **Non-technology forms of contact:** written notes, personal phone calls
- **Phone calls:** phone call from one individual to another
- **Protocol:** written system or way of doing something
• Professional development: specific training for educators, parents, support staff
• Research: questionnaires or other ways of finding information
• Student instruction: specific instruction in technology use
• Technology: electronic forms of communication, including e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, websites, listservs, student information systems (including Aspen, the system used at LSSD), "robocalls", blogs
• Time: speed of occurrences, making room in schedules
• Trust: confidence that person will not be ridiculed or judged, belief that things are being done with good intentions with students in mind
• Variety of information: assortment of facts being conveyed

Data Tables

For each group of participants, administrators, teachers, and parents the information will be presented first in table form, followed by a discussion of the sub-questions in chronological order.
The following table illustrates the themes as stated by the three building administrators and the superintendent of the LSSD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th>Dr. Thomas</th>
<th>Ms. Anderson</th>
<th>Ms. Hamilton</th>
<th>Ms. Waters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td>Multiple modalities</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Technology Audience</td>
<td>Technology Audience</td>
<td>Frequency Audience</td>
<td>Multiple modalities</td>
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<td>Audience</td>
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<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
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<td>Variety of information</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td>Misinformation</td>
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<td>Misinformation Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Protocol</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve</td>
<td>Human initiative</td>
<td>Human initiative</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Human initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Administrator themes by sub-questions

Within the administrator group, four themes emerged from the answers to sub-question number one, which was to describe communication in general at LSHS. The themes that emerged were multiple modalities, technology, audience, and the frequency of communication. Technology was mentioned by all administrators as being important in the overall communication process at LSHS and throughout the school district. Dr. Thomas uses list serves and the department website to communicate with various stake holders. “I do a lot of communicating to the community through list serves, through our website and those things range
from emergency notices about snow cancellations, to major announcements about what's happening at school.”

Ms. Anderson, the interim principal, relies on technology for communicating with parents and faculty. “Every week we have two different listservs that go out to the community at large. One is for parents; the audience is intended to be the parents and students. The other is for the faculty. The faculty listserv also includes school committee members and central office administrators, but the intended audience is the high school faculty.” The parent list serv is informational. It gives dates of upcoming school wide events such as Common Core testing dates, announcements of extracurricular activities, for instance the dates and times of the drama club productions. There are often links to information from outside the school department such as a link to the Hood Scholarship program. The faculty list serv is now in blog form called the Friday Focus. It contains, graphics such as photographs of students working in class, links to outside sources such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) website and celebrations of what is going on in classes, for instance the use of data clickers for formative assessments in chemistry class.

In answer to sub-question number two, which was to describe the positive aspects of communication at LSHS four themes emerged: time, technology, audience and the variety of information that is communicated. Ms. Waters, the interim principal’s intern had a positive view of the amount of time built into the schedule for regular meetings of academic departments and the instructional leaders as well as the entire faculty. “Communication is also facilitated verbally through our instructional leadership team. We do provide agendas for the instructional leadership team and that goes to departments in their common planning time. I feel there's
adequate time during the day for departments to meet and then we also have our faculty meetings where other information can be shared.”

Sub-question number three asked the administrators to define the challenges of communication at LSHS. Four themes emerged from these discussions: time, technology, trust, and misinformation. Both Dr. Thomas, the superintendent, and Ms. Harris, the assistant principal, addressed the concept of misinformation. For Dr. Thomas, it was a matter of staying in front of rumors, raised by all members of the school community, including elected officials and educators. “So it's important that we recognize that communication is a two way street; that I have the ability and administration has the ability and anyone in a position of leadership has the ability to stay in front of whatever the rumor is out there, but also that those who come to a conclusion about something feel comfortable coming to leadership in the high school and district leadership and asking the question, ’Is it true?’” Ms. Harris, the assistant principal, saw time and technology as having possible roles in misunderstandings. “Everybody's so busy; it's really a challenge, especially face-to-face communication. The emails fly back and forth and they're so easily misinterpreted or taken for a misunderstanding of tone or inference in email. Although it's good that people email back and forth and have written communication, I wish that we had more time for face-to-face because that's when you really understand what somebody's going through rather than just an email, but we're just so busy. It's a busy, busy place.”

Sub-question number four asked for the respondents’ perceptions as to why the challenges existed. The three themes that emerged were time, technology, and trust. Ms. Harris, the part-time teacher and interim principal’s intern, spoke to the idea of creating a school culture of trust. “I think there's a school culture that has to be really intact. It has to be a school culture of trust and mutual respect, so that when a communication comes through, people can believe
what they're hearing is honest and true or they can imagine the viewpoint of someone else. I know sometimes the best laid plans can be ill-received by somebody else. That can happen in person as well. That can happen in a letter. That can happen in so many different ways, so within the building there needs to be a strong professional culture and trust.”

Sub-question number five asked participants to offer suggestions to address the challenges. The four themes that emerged from the responses were: technology, professional development, protocol, and trust. Ms. Anderson spoke to the need for protocols around certain forms of communication. “You have to have some parameters built up that how you communicate and who you communicate with. And if you're using a large high school Twitter account, you can't just follow anybody because those tweets would be part of the LSHS, so if you're doing something as an LSHS teacher that's your moniker and you want to make sure you're using that account for your business as teacher at school.”

Sub-question six asked participants to describe opportunities to improve the communication at LSHS. Two themes emerged; human initiative and technology. Ms. Anderson, the interim principal, believed that communication could be improved. “The opportunities...there could be social media blitz...now that we're wireless in this building...if people were comfortable and parents were comfortable, teachers could be taking all kinds of pictures in their classroom and tweeting it out or sending it to the group listserv from that class and showing what is going on, but that all takes time and some teachers don't feel comfortable with that yet. They're just not there.”
The following table summarizes the themes from the teacher’s focus group in which four teachers representing three departments participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th>Mr. Brown</th>
<th>Ms. Paine</th>
<th>Ms. Martin</th>
<th>Ms. Jones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges exist</td>
<td>Human component</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human component</td>
<td>Human component</td>
<td>Speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve communication</td>
<td>Student instruction</td>
<td>Student instruction</td>
<td>Student instruction</td>
<td>Student instruction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Teacher themes by sub-questions
Within the teacher focus group, two themes emerged from the answers to sub-question number one, which was to describe communication in general at LSHS: technology and face-to-face communication. Ms. Martin described the extent to which she saw technology involved in the communication process. “I think communication has changed a lot here at the high school. I think the advent of technology and how it's really permeated all levels of communication whether it be teacher to teacher, teacher to student, teacher to parent, school to parent.” Mr. Brown is the school web site manager in addition to teaching business classes, and works with teachers to develop their pages on the school web site. He talked about face-to-face communication in this aspect of his job. “Technology has given us a lot of capability in communicating both formally and informally. Most of the time communicating with teachers is if I see them in the hallway, or when they stop by to visit or I'll stop by to visit.” All of the teachers spoke of the importance of Common Planning Time (CPT) meetings as an avenue of face-to-face communication. Ms. Martin explained, “We have our CPT which is common planning time, so within our departments we meet so even though we're separated by floors, it gives us a chance to talk to the teachers and say ‘what are you doing in your class?’”

In answer to sub-question number two, which was to describe the positive aspects of communication at LSHS, technology emerged as the sole theme. All teachers mentioned the use of the student information system, Aspen, as a major factor in communicating with parents. Ms. Martin spoke about the ease of using Aspen for communicating. “I have to notify certain parents, it's easy to send an email through Aspen. I don't have to create a distribution list. It's already there for me.” Ms. Paine teaches art and is one of the district art coordinators. She coordinates the many art shows in which LSHS students participate and spoke her recent use of Aspen as a communication tool. “I just found out how to do it last week because, usually, I do so many
shows and then I individually email those parents and then if they can't get there I take pictures of the shows and email it to the parents.”

Sub-question number three asked the teachers to define the challenges of communication at LSHS. Three themes emerged from the discussions: technology, expectations, and time. Ms. Jones, the music teacher, describes the expectation and accompanying pressure felt by teachers in responding to parent e-mails. “The varying expectations for the parents and perhaps the students, although I haven't seen that as much but sometimes they may expect - how can I say that - more communication than you're aware or that you're prepared to do. I guess is what I'm trying to say is because you can communicate so easily, sometimes I think that I feel, I don't know what word I'm looking for but maybe taken advantage of.”

Sub-question number four asked for the respondents’ perceptions as to why the challenges existed. Six themes emerged; human component, speed, time, technology, information, and expectations. The teachers found many different possible reasons for the existence of the challenges to effective communication. Ms. Jones spoke to the issue of up-to-date technology not being evenly dispersed among the teachers. “One of the other challenges that I'd like to bring up is the inconsistency of the availability to work, the technology. Today I was trying to get something done that should have taken maybe five or ten minutes, but for whatever reason, my computer was running as slow as Moses and I couldn't get it done. You can't count on it.” Mr. Brown discussed the missing human element in technology. “And also with the technology, you don't get the emotion that's with it, you don't get the tone. Like in business, I'd have to go to China or India to meet with them first before I'd have any kind of trust. They have to see you, experience you and then you can have conference calls. It's the same thing here.”
Sub-question number five asked participants to offer suggestions to address the challenges. Infrastructure was the only theme to emerge. Mr. Brown, who is a retired businessman with expertise in computers, expressed his frustration. “It would have been nice instead of getting the Chromebooks to get the classrooms enabled first. Everyone would have Aquos Boards, new PCs. Start from there first and get your assets in place including your networks. The network is slow. They have old servers that they're going through for the network. I know that they know that.” Ms. Martin, the history teacher, summed up her frustration with technology and offered a first step as part of a solution. “Ask me what I need in my classroom to support me as a teacher to make me a better teacher because I know what I need to do with my students. That makes me the most effective teacher possible, not technology that no one trains me and shows me how to use and says just go.” (Although she was addressing classroom technology in general, this idea could also be applied to technology for communication.)

Sub-question six asked participants to describe opportunities to improve the communication at LSHS. The only theme to emerge was that of student instruction. Ms. Jones expressed that she would like students to be made aware of proper technology use. “I'd like to see all kids be required to take as part of a class or workshop with their parents, proper uses versus improper uses of technology.” Mr. Brown felt that the instruction should be incorporated in the Technology Readiness course, which all students are required to take and pass.
The following table summarizes the themes in the parent focus group and e-mails in which four parents representing students in grades 9, 10, and 12 participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th>Mr. Carpenter</th>
<th>Ms. Baker</th>
<th>Ms. Colt</th>
<th>Ms. Hutchins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Phone calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phone calls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Direct contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges exist</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Lack of non-technology contact</td>
<td>Lack of non-technology contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve communication</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Multiple forms of communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple forms of communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Parent themes by sub-questions

Within the parent focus group, two themes emerged from the answers to sub-question number one, which was to describe communication in general at LSHS; technology and phone calls. Parents listed the various forms of communication that they received list-serv notices, e-
mails, and automated phone calls. Ms. Baker stated that the lack of communication was an issue when she was not notified ahead of time that her son was in danger of failing a class. “Parents should not receive a letter after report cards are sent stating that a child is at risk for failing a class. This should be a phone call prior to end of the quarter, describing the issue and brainstorming a possible resolution.”

In answer to sub-question number two, which was to describe the positive aspects of communication at LSHS, two themes emerged: technology and direct contact. As in the overall description of communication at LSHS, technology was seen an advantage at the school. Parents reported that both the list servs and the automated phone calls were important ways in which they received information about the school. Ms. Hutchins, the guardian for her granddaughter, admitted that she is less tech-savvy than other parents and she appreciated direct contact such as a letter she received that gave her granddaughter options to make up failed classes. As previously mentioned, Ms. Baker spoke to the timely e-mails from teachers concerning her son.

Sub-question number three asked parents to define the challenges of communication at LSHS. Two themes emerged from these discussions; technology and time. Ms. Baker, Ms. Hutchins, and Ms. Colt were concerned that not all parents have regular access to e-mail and therefore would not receive notifications sent electronically.

Sub-question number four asked for the respondents’ perceptions as to why the challenges existed. The two themes that emerged were parental involvement and non-technology forms of contact. Ms. Baker indicated that parental involvement was important in the communication process, but that it could be lacking for a variety of reasons. “Parent involvement varies; this could be due to working multiple jobs, language or cultural barriers.” Ms. Hutchins
expressed frustration at people who did not return phone calls. “I'm from the old school and I think you should return all messages within 24 hours. If I can take the time to make the call, the person that I'm calling should be able to take the time to make the call. I'm not always at my computer. I'm old school and I sit at home waiting for that phone call.” Mr. Carpenter stated, “I think high school parents are naturally less involved if child does not have academic difficulties.”

Sub-question number five asked participants to offer suggestions to address the challenges. The sole theme that emerged from the responses was research. Ms. Baker suggested finding out how other communities have handled communication challenges; “research communities that have had similar issues and what they have done to address them.” Mr. Carpenter suggested polling parents to get their ideas.

Sub-question six asked participants to describe opportunities to improve the communication at LSHS. Two themes emerged; training and multiple forms of information. Mr. Carpenter felt that targeted professional development would improve communication at LSHS. In response to sub-question six, he responded, “Training teachers and staff when it is appropriate/necessary to reach out to parent, especially when child has behavioral or learning issues.” Ms. Colt wondered if there could be other forms of communication for the non-technology focused parents and guardians. “I guess maybe in the beginning of the year, give families the option of receiving communication in a different format. I don't know if they do that. I've never seen that as an option.” Ms. Baker, a parent, felt that communication could be better if the school helped both teachers and parents to better understand the communication process through low-cost or free workshops.
The following table combines all of the themes from the three groups (administrators, parents, and teachers) for side by side comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple modalities</td>
<td>Face-to-face communication</td>
<td>Phone calls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variety of information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misinformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges exist</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Human component</td>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Non-technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>forms of contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve communication</td>
<td>Human initiative</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple forms of communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Themes by participant groups
The researcher then reviewed the themes in each of the three sub-groups and looked for common themes to all three groups. The following table shows themes that were present, by sub-question, in all three groups (administrators, parents, and teachers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td>Technology, Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges exist</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td>Nothing present in all three groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve communication</td>
<td>Nothing present in all three groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 Components common to all three groups, by sub-question
Next, the researcher studied the common themes to see if there were any that were present in two out of three groups. The following table shows that time and technology themes occurred in the administrator and teacher groups as perceptions as to why communication challenges exist at LSHS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-question</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Communication in general</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Positive Aspects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Perceptions of why challenges exist</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How to address challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Opportunities to improve communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 Components common to two groups, by sub-question

Results

Interviews were conducted with three school administrators (the interim principal, the assistant principal, and the interim principal’s intern who was a former department head) as well as two central office administrators (the superintendent and the school department data manager). Two focus groups were conducted, one for teachers and one for parents. Two parents were interested in participating in the research, but were not able to meet at the time of the focus group and provided answers via e-mail. While the information was useful and added to the research, information gained by non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions, was not present. Most participants were available for follow up questions through e-
mail, a mutually agreed-upon method. The grandmother/guardian of the high school student requested phone contact and a personal meeting in order to review and clarify her answers. The researcher complied with her preferences.

The two recurring themes in the six research sub-questions were technology and time. They were found in answers to the research sub-questions in all three groups of participants (administrators, teachers, and parents). Technology was found to be the most common theme. It showed as a theme in all six sub-questions. The second most frequent theme was time, appearing in four sub-questions: 2 (positive aspects), 3 (challenges), 4 (perceptions of why challenges exist) and 5 (how to address challenges).

**Research Sub-Questions**

Six questions were asked in the interviews of the superintendent and the three school administrators (the interim principal, the assistant principal, and the interim principal’s intern). These same questions were also used in the teacher focus group and the parent focus group, and were e-mailed to the two parents who were interested in participating but unable to attend the focus group.

- Question 1 asked participants to describe communication at Large Suburban High School.
- Question 2 asked participants to describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School.
- Question 3 asked participants to define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School.
- Question 4 asked participants to explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School.
- Question 5 asked participants to tell how they believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School.
- Question 6 asked participants to describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School.

Technology was mentioned as a major component of the communication process at LSHS by all three groups of participants (administrators, teachers, and parents). It was also seen as a factor in the positive aspects of communication, as well as a factor in communication challenges at LSHS. Various types of technology were named by administrators, parents and teachers as being utilized to communicate with different parts of the LSHS community; e-mail, Twitter, listservs, the school web site, Facebook pages, and Aspen, the student information system. Technology was mentioned as one of the reasons communication challenges exist at LSHS. Ms. Paine, a teacher stated that she could not obtain certain technology in her classroom, while Ms. Hamilton, the assistant principal for teaching and learning, lamented that e-mails have the down-side of possible misinterpretation. “The emails fly back and forth and they're so easily misinterpreted or taken for a misunderstanding of tone or inference in email.” Technology was also seen as a way communication challenges could be addressed by an administrator. Dr. Thomas, the superintendent, saw promise in text messaging for emergencies. “We're even looking at initiating this summer a text messaging protocol for emergency notices so that anyone can learn about closure of the school by getting text messages a little quicker notice than having to look at your email to see a list serve or answer your home phone when it's robocalls.”

Technology was also seen as an opportunity to strengthen communication at LSHS. Ms. Anderson, the interim principal, saw the possibility of using the new LSHS website as an avenue of communication between teachers and parents and students, but noted that the site was still in its infancy and not all teachers were using it to its potential. “We have a new website and each teacher is supposed to put a little something about themselves. They each have a page. Some teachers use it quite well and have a lot of assignments up there and some teachers just have their
picture.” Ms. Colt, a parent, saw potential for the website as a more accessible form of communication than other forms of electronic communication. “I don't know if what they send on the lists or what we get via email gets posted on the high school Web page. So even if you don't have regular email access, maybe you can get to the high school's Web page and get in PDF form the list serve information or something so it doesn't require an email communication but just the high school web site.”

Time was named as a factor in sub-questions two (positive aspects), three (challenges), four (perceptions of why challenges exist) and five (how to address challenges). From an administrator point of view, Ms. Harris, the assistant principal for teaching and learning, perceives regularly scheduled department time as a positive aspect of communication. “I think CPT's have improved the common planning time within departments, that's helped communication...colleague to colleague...within a content area.” Ms. Baker, a parent, commented on the challenges that exist as a response to sub-question 3: “Teachers have many students and parents to communicate with; it may be difficult for teachers to address individual concerns with parents in timely fashion.” Time is seen as a perception as to why communication challenges exist, as explained by Ms. Martin, a social studies teacher. “The concern is that there's one of us and you might have anywhere from 125 to school-wide there's 1,500 kids and they want us to be on call, like you said 24/7. And I'm seeing this with this challenge to communication.” Time is also seen as a way to address communication challenges. Ms. Harris, the assistant principal, sees carving out professional development time as an opportunity to improve communication at LSHS. “In the fall, when we're starting to go to the one-to-one initiative, we are planning two days of professional development which we're going to differentiate for teachers. For those who are total novices, they need to start out with simple Google docs and email. To those teachers
ready to move several steps beyond that and start with learning management systems and other things to flip their classes and blended learning. But it's important that we not overwhelm the beginners with all the possibilities.”

In summary, the participants provided a variety of perspectives to the quest for understanding communication at LSHS. There were commonalities within groups, as well as between groups. Ultimately, two themes emerged throughout all groups; time and technology. Time was seen as a positive aspect by administrators who felt there was plenty of time for communication built into the weekly and daily teaching schedules. Time was also seen as a challenge by teachers who felt that the mindset of many parents and students is that immediate response to all e-mail or other technology communication is required. Technology was a ubiquitous theme in this research. All groups mentioned it as a positive aspect to communication at LSHS, but it was seen as a challenge when it was not available or when it was not working properly. The findings gave a detailed snapshot of what the key stakeholders at LSHS perceive to be the communication process, as well as challenges and opportunities for improvement in communication at this school.
Chapter 5 Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to understand the communication challenges and opportunities for LSHS stakeholders including parents, teachers, school administrators, and central office administrators. The overarching question that drove the research was, “what is the process by which key stakeholders at LSHS, including administrators, teachers, and parents engage in communication?” In order to discover and understand the nuances of this central question, six sub-questions were provided to ask the stakeholders to describe their experiences in general with communication, positive aspects of communication and challenges to communication, and to explain their beliefs about why these challenges exist and what opportunities exist to overcome them. The six sub-questions were:

1) How do teachers, administrators and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?
2) How do teachers, administrators and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?
3) How do teachers, administrators and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?
4) How do teachers, administrators and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?
5) How do teachers, administrators and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?
6) How do teachers, administrators and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?

This chapter examines the results of the case study examining communication at LSHS. It was evident from the research that communication had different meanings and implications to the various study participants. The teachers were concerned about communication with parents, students, and, to a lesser extent, administrators. The parents were most concerned with
communication from school personnel, especially their own child’s teacher(s). The district administrator was most concerned with staying ahead of rumors, indicating that he felt that his job was to communicate facts to all parts of the school community, including the school committee. School-based administrators were concerned with communication from administrators to teachers, communication among teachers and communication from school personnel to parents and guardians.

1 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe communication at Large Suburban High School?

Within the group of teacher participants, two themes emerged; technology and face-to-face communication. Within the group of administrators, four themes emerged from this sub-question: multiple modalities, technology, audience, and frequency of communication. Among the parent participants two themes emerged: technology and phone calls. Looking at the participants as a whole, the only common theme that emerged was technology. Aspen, the student information system was mentioned as an easy way for teachers to communicate with students and parents. Ms. Harris, the school department data manager, described how Aspen could be used for communication by teachers, parents, and administrators: “e-mailing through Aspen is very, very easy for a teacher.” She explained how a teacher could email the parents of an entire class: “he can just go to the roster and simply option ‘send email.’”. Some parents were concerned about the use of technology as the major communication tool, indicating that not all parents were frequent users of technology and would prefer more traditional contact, such as a phone call.
2 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe the positive aspects of communication at Large Suburban High School?

The teacher participants identified only one positive aspect of communication at LSHS: technology. Among the administrator participants, four themes emerged from this sub-question: time, technology, audience, and the variety of information that is communicated. Two themes emerged from the parents’ participation: technology and direct contact. Clearly, technology was a common theme of positive aspects of communication at LSHS among the groups of participants.

3 How do teachers, administrators and parents define challenges to communication at Large Suburban High School?

Four themes emerged from the teacher participants’ answers to defining communication challenges at LSHS: technology, expectations, time, and information. Likewise, four themes emerged from the administrator participants; however, two of the themes were different. The themes from administrators were technology, time, trust, and misinformation. Two themes emerged from the parent participants: technology and time. The two themes common to all groups of participants were technology and time.

4 How do teachers, administrators and parents explain why challenges exist in communication at Large Suburban High School?

The perception of why challenges exist in communication varied between the groups. The themes seen in the teacher group were technology, information, the human component, speed and expectations. The themes that emerged from administrator participants were technology, trust, and time. Parent participants identified parental involvement and the lack of non-technology contact as explanations to communication challenges. No common themes were found among the participant groups. However, technology emerged as a theme among
administrators and teachers, while the related theme of non-technology contact emerged from parent feedback.

5 How do teachers, administrators and parents believe that communication challenges can be addressed at Large Suburban High School?

The sole theme that emerged from teacher participants’ answers to the fifth sub-question was the infrastructure of the school, specifically the computers and other hardware as well as the software installed on the computers. The two themes that emerged from the administrator participants were professional development and trust. Parents identified further research as a theme in addressing communication challenges at LSHS. There were no common themes among the participant groups; each group had a different belief as to the best way to address the challenges to communication at LSHS.

6 How do teachers, administrators and parents describe opportunities to strengthen communication at Large Suburban High School?

The sole emergent theme from teacher participants when describing opportunities to strengthen communication at LSHS was student instruction. Among the administrator participants, two themes emerged: human initiative and technology. Parent participants identified training and the use of multiple sources to communicate as themes. Again, there was little consistency among the three participant groups; however, instruction and training could be seen as similar ideas.

Williams and Chavkin (1989) identified seven essential elements common to all of the parent involvement programs in five states in the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory region. These elements were: written policies, administrative support, training,
partnership approach, two-way communication, networking, and evaluation. If communication is a type of parent involvement as Epstein (1995) purports, then LSHS is deficient in some aspects.

According to the superintendent of LSSD, there is no written policy on communication within the district: “I don't believe there's an official communication policy with regard to communicating with the rest of the community.” The assistant principal of the school stated that the written policy at LSHS, which had been one of the school-wide goals under the state of Rhode Island evaluation system, which requires schools to set school goals, had been eliminated: “It has become an accepted practice. Many of the teachers who did a professional goal used it, but we did allow others to choose more personalized goals.” The previous written school-wide goal required all teachers and administrators to respond to parent contact within two school days. The teachers in the focus group referenced this practice, apparently not aware that it was no longer a written policy requiring a specific time for a response to parent communication. Parents affirmed that they did not always receive return communication from school personnel in a timely manner. The parent of a ninth grade boy who was not notified of his impending failure by anyone at the school stated “I do not know of an actual communication process at the school. Administration and supervisors should follow up with teachers and staff regarding policy for communicating with parents. For example, parents should not receive a letter after report cards are sent that their child is at risk of failing a class. This should be a phone call prior to the quarter end with the parent, describing the issue and a resolution to the issue.” The guardian of a tenth grade girl expressed her concern receiving communication from the school. “I'm from the old school and I think you should return all messages within 24 hours. If I can take the time to make the call, the person that I'm calling should be able to take the time to make the call. I'm not always at my computer...I'm old school...and I sit at home waiting for that phone call.”
The reality at LSHS: according to the faculty handbook, there is no specified timeline for communication with parents. The handbook states that “teachers are expected to adhere to all deadlines for posting grades and communicating this information to students and parents. Teachers are also expected to respond to requests for parent meetings in a timely manner.” The reporting of grades is addressed in one section of the faculty handbook. “Teachers will update grades in Aspen at the set dates established for each quarter. Guidance counselors and administrators will work with teachers to maintain communication of this information with parents/guardians and students. For a semester course, teachers will establish a documented communication (ex. phone call, email, meeting, and written dialogue) with the parent/guardian of students who are in danger of failing the course for the semester once first quarter grades have closed. For a full-year course, teachers will establish a documented communication (ex. phone call, email, meeting, and written dialogue) with the parent/guardian of students who are in danger of failing the course for the year once first semester grades have closed.”

Recommendation for Further Research

Further research in the field of high school communication would include alternate forms of non-technology communication with parents who do not have access to e-mail and electronic communication such as cell phones. There are also some parents who do not have the time or technology to access student information systems such as Aspen. What should schools do to communicate with these parents?

The next step for LSHS is to determine how best to communicate with all parents. In the 2014-2016 School Improvement Plan goal 4 is communication. The plan specifically addresses that “guidance counselors and administrators will work with teachers to maintain communication
of this information (grades as reported in the Aspen student information system) with parents/guardians and students.” Administrators, guidance counselors and teachers should work together to ensure that all parents receive this information in a timely manner, especially those who choose not to use the Aspen system for information about grades. Information about if parents want to be informed of grades in a manner other than through Aspen should be obtained when the student enrolls for the first time or at the beginning of the school year.

The research showed that time and technology were the two common themes throughout the three groups of participants answering the six sub-questions. A significant issue that some parents raised was that they did not receive communication from the school in a timely manner. This issue was raised in the recommendations made by the NEASC visiting team in September 2013.

The school needs to address these recommendations in a timely manner. As the educational leaders the responsibility for doing this falls to the administrators. The NEASC visiting team report pointed out deficiencies in communication with all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and the community. Areas of focus should include communicating the school’s 21st-century learning expectations to all students and their families, and to the school community; improving the communication to the teachers of the connection between current mandates, such as the implementation of the new teacher evaluation plan and Common Core implementation and teaching and learning; ensuring that all families of at-risk students are informed about available support services; and ensuring the timely delivery of Individualized Education Program (IEP) information to all teachers of students with IEPs.
Some considerations for LSHS to consider are writing and using protocols for two-way communications with parents and guardians. According to the superintendent, there are no written district protocols. The interim principal stated that the written school-wide goal of communication with parents was eliminated, although teachers could choose that goal as an individual goal under the current teacher evaluation system. The research showed that some parents are not receiving return communication from the school. This clearly disengages a parent or guardian who is attempting to be involved in the child’s education. It also indicates that there needs to be a written policy to ensure that every parent has an opportunity to be engaged in effective two-way communication that will assist the parent in helping their child fulfill their academic goals.

Teachers felt that students and parents would benefit from direct instruction in proper technology use in the school. If this is not already incorporated into the Technology Preparedness class that is required of all students at LSHS, it should be considered. Parents also stated that offering workshops on communication technology would be helpful. Perhaps more parents would feel comfortable using the Aspen student information system if they received specific instruction in how to use the system effectively.

LSHS does not have a specific written communication plan, but based on the accounts of the participants, there are grounds for creating one. Teachers and administrators already use multiple ways of informing parents and guardians about what is happening at the school, including many forms of technology. One of the challenges brought forth by participants is that while direct contact may be desired, time and schedule constraints make it difficult for that to happen consistently. According to Media Richness theory, certain types of information are best exchanged through direct contact (Lengel & Daft, 1989). Joyce Epstein (2008) advocates two-
way communications as a form of parent involvement at all grade levels but especially at the high school levels when other forms of parent involvement may have waned. LSHS has an opportunity to change the perception that communication is an issue at the school by looking at research in school communication and working together as a learning community to strengthen communication at the school for the benefit of all the stakeholders. The educational leaders, including administrators, should take the lead in determining a written communication plan, taking into consideration that technology alone is not a sufficient method to ensure effective communication with all parents and guardians.

Future research considerations might include determining the best method of communicating with all high school parents and guardians. This could include investigations into the effectiveness of the various methods of communication for general information about school matters such as sports practice schedules, student presentations and general meetings as well as meetings about individual student behavior and academic performance. Just as educators differentiate instruction and assessment based on student needs, educational leaders should individualize communication with all parents based on needs and preferences.

The following guidelines for communication accountability are offered to LSHS in an effort to ensure effective two way communication with all parents and guardians. Administrators should work with school leaders to:

- Poll parents as to their communication preferences
- Offer small-group parent training for use of Aspen student information system
- Work with administrators, teachers and parents to develop a written plan for effective two-way communication including timely return of parent phone calls and e-mails.
• Put the communication plan into effect.
• Evaluate the communication plan and update it as needed.

Large Suburban High School is a leading school according to the Rhode Island Department of Education classification system. Resolving communication issues will ensure more parental involvement during the crucial high school years.
References


[http://www.iacact.com/?q=commfwk](http://www.iacact.com/?q=commfwk)


Large Suburban High School Faculty Handbook (2015)

Large Suburban High School School Improvement Plan 2014-2016


http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/opportunity

http://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1758


SurveyWorks! Reports Retrieved from Rhode Island Department of Education website:

http://surveyworks.ride.ri.gov/


Appendix A

Permission to Use Site for Research

LARGE SUBURBAN SCHOOL DEPARTMENT
Office of the Superintendent

September 30, 2014

To whom it may concern:

This letter is to approve the request of Ms. Lynn Sironen to conduct research at Large Suburban High School for the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University.

It is understood that strict confidentiality will be used in disclosing any identifying features or names of individuals participating in the study. The school will be identified as Large Suburban High School only.

If there are any questions concerning this research, please contact my office at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Sincerely,

Superintendent of Schools

ABC/de

The Large Suburban School Department does not discriminate on the basis of age, sex, race, religion, national or ethnic origin, color disability, status as a veteran or sexual orientation.
Appendix B

IRB approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: January 29, 2015
IRB #: CP914-12-1-

Principal Investigator(s):
Kathleen Clemen
Lynn Streeter

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Beacon
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Understanding Communication of LSIB

Participating Sites:
School District permission letter in file

DHEAS Review Category: Expedited 46, 47

Informed Consent: One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JANUARY 28, 2016

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when enrolling participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or any information that may alter our perception of the benefits/risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies only to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other activity approved that may also be necessary.

C. Randall Cole, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Kay C. Riggs, Director
Human Subjects Research Protection Office

Northeastern University IRB #4639
Appendix C

Informed Consent Letter

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. Student researcher, Lynn Sironen

Title of Project: Understanding Communication at Large Suburban High School

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be a part of this study because you are a stakeholder at Large Suburban High School as a parent, an administrator, a teacher or a community member.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to investigate and understand communication at Large Suburban High School.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in a focus group or participate in an individual interview. The student researcher will ask a series of open-ended questions and record the answers using an audio-recorder and by taking written notes.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
If you are being interviewed individually you will be interviewed in the site of your choice at a mutually arranged time. The interview will last approximately one hour.
If you are part of a focus group, the focus group will meet in a meeting room at the school for ninety minutes. The invitation letter has the time, date and location site.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no identifiable risks or discomfort. In order to protect confidentiality no actual names or identifying characteristics will be used in the report.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help improve communication at the high school in the future.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the confidential information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you or any individual as being of this project.
Data will be maintained on the researcher’s password-protected computer and audio-files and written documents will be stored in the researcher’s locked file cabinet until the research report is written.
In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There are no identifiable risks or discomfort in this research; you may withdraw at any time.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Lynn Sironen, the person mainly responsible for the research, at Sironen.1@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 401-487-2947
You can also contact Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. at k.clemons@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $10 gift card to Dunkin Donuts as soon as you complete the interview or focus group process.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There will be no additional costs to participate in this research.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part __________________________ Date __________________________
Printed name of person above __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent __________________________ Date __________________________
Printed name of person above __________________________
Appendix D

Teacher letter

Dear teachers,

My name is Lynn Sironen and I recently retired as assistant principal at Large Suburban High School. I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. My research is about understanding communication at Large Suburban High School.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research and share your experiences with communication at Large Suburban High School by participating in a focus group on Monday, March 23, 2015 from 2:15 to 3:45 p.m. in the media center at Large Suburban High School. The purpose of the focus group is to obtain information about teachers’ experiences with the communication process at the school. Light refreshments will be served and a $10 Dunkin Donuts gift card will be given to all participants as a token for the appreciation of your valuable time.

Please contact me at Sironen.l@husky.neu.edu or at 401-487-2947 to sign up for the focus group or I can answer any questions you may have about the research or the focus group.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences with me.

Sincerely,

Lynn Sironen
Appendix E

Parent Letter

March 6, 2015

Dear parent,

My name is Lynn Sironen and I recently retired as assistant principal at Large Suburban High School. I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. My research is about understanding communication at Large Suburban High School. I would like to invite you to participate in this research and share your experiences with communication at Large Suburban High School by participating in a focus group on Tuesday, March 31, 2015 from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. in the media center at Large Suburban High School. The purpose of the focus group is to obtain information about parents’ experiences with the communication process at the school. Light refreshments will be served and a $10 Dunkin Donuts gift card will be given to all participants as a token for the appreciation of your valuable time.

Please contact me at Sironen.1@husky.neu.edu or at 401-487-2947 to sign up for the focus group or I can answer any questions you may have about the research or the focus group.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences with me.

Sincerely,

Lynn Sironen
Appendix F

Administrator e-mail

Dear Administrator,

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. My research is about understanding communication at Large Suburban High School.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research and share your experiences with communication at Large Suburban High School by participating in a one hour interview on a date, time and location to be determined by you. The purpose of the interview is to obtain information about your experiences with the communication process at the school.

Please contact me at Sironen.l@husky.neu.edu or at 401-487-2947 to arrange a time for the interview or I can answer any questions you may have about the research or the interview.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences with me. I look forward to talking to you soon.

Sincerely,

Lynn Sironen