



24th ANNUAL PUBLIC RELATIONS EXECUTIVES MEETING

July 17-19, 2025

Washington Hilton

1919 Connecticut Ave, NW

Washington, DC 20009

(202) 483-3000

#PRE2025

Agenda

Thursday, July 17

6:00 – 8:30 p.m.

Dinner

Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab
750 15th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005
(A 10-minute cab ride from the Hilton)

Welcome

Tonya Harris, Director of Communications
Council of the Great City Schools

Ray Hart, Executive Director
Council of the Great City Schools

Greetings

Dr. Lewis Ferebee, Chancellor
District of Columbia Public Schools

Introduction of Guest Speaker

Joanne Coley, Communications Manager
Council of the Great City Schools

Guest Speaker

LaWanda Toney, former Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Communications and Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Education

Award-winning communications executive, LaWanda Toney explores how powerful, people-centered communication can transform urban schools from the inside out. With humor and real talk, she will break down what effective internal and external communication *really* looks like in today's fast-moving, culturally rich school communities. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting education landscape—marked by political tensions, evolving parent expectations, and increased demands for transparency—LaWanda will unpack what these changes mean for communications professionals and why their role has never been more critical.

Friday, July 18

7:00 – 7:30 a.m.

Yoga in the Morning (Heights Courtyard, Lobby Level)

Start your day with an accessible, all-inclusive exercise program. All levels welcome. Set your intention for the conference and leave feeling refreshed. Mats and towels will be provided. If you would like to participate, **please [click on this link](#)** to sign up.

7:30 – 10:00 a.m.

Registration (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

8:00 – 9:00 a.m.

Breakfast (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

Sponsor: K12 Insight
Peachjar

9:00 - 9:25 a.m.

Welcome & Introductions (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

Tonya Harris, Director of Communications
Council of the Great City Schools

9:25 – 9:30 a.m.

5-Minute Morning Mindset Reset

Begin your conference experience from a place of clarity and focus with this brief yet powerful guided meditation. In just five minutes, reconnect with your breath and presence to enhance your ability to absorb insights, engage authentically, and approach the day's learning with an open, centered mind.

Presenter:

Karianne Michelle, Founder & CEO, Lofti

9:30 – 10:00 a.m.

The Dynamic Duo: How Superpowered Superintendents and Communication Leads Can Build Trust, Tackle Misinformation, and Increase Positive Media Coverage

Batman and Robin. Thelma and Louise. Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen. Sonny and Cher. The list goes on. There are countless examples of partnerships whose synergy has yielded amazing results. In school public relations, there are few partnerships more important than that of the superintendent and the communications lead and their team. In this engaging and informative session, you'll learn from a member of one such dynamic duo and hear strategies and tips based on real-life examples of how the School District of Philadelphia drives and measures positive media coverage, improves public perception, executes effective crisis communications, and increases awareness of district initiatives and programming.

Presenter:

Alexandra Coppadge, Chief of Communications and Customer Service

The School District of Philadelphia

10:00 – 10:45 a.m.

The Five Phases of Enrollment Marketing

Nearly every aspect of a district's operations, from staffing to program offerings, stems from one key factor: enrollment. Your enrollment numbers determine your funding, and your funding determines just about everything else. Enrollment marketing is a complex problem that can't be solved with a simple answer, but one strategy can help: the customer journey. Learn the path to building exceptional enrollment marketing for your schools. Learn from Denver Public Schools how they went to a 100% school choice district and their success in enrollment marketing to all families.

Presenters:

Bill Good, Chief of Communications, Denver Public Schools

Greg Turchetta, Strategic Communications Advisor
Apptegy

10:45 – 11:00 a.m.

Coffee Break

11:00 - 12:15 p.m.

What Works! Sharing Best Practices/Breakout Groups

A round robin discussion where districts will be asked to share successful communication strategies and initiatives. We will also break out into groups to discuss these four “hot topics” facing urban school district communicators.

“When Tragedy Strikes: Reclaiming the Narrative Amid a Storm of Blame”

Communicating about a tragedy and handling the media's misplaced blame on the school district.

"In the Wake of Loss: A District's Role in Healing and Support"

How do school districts appropriately respond to the death of a student?

“The Shutdown Shake-Up: Lessons From Two Closure Plans”

Closing schools – and how plans can work.

“After the Arrest: Standing Strong When the Threat of ICE Comes to the School Community”

Reacting to the ICE arrest of a student – and protecting other students, families, and the district's reputation.

Moderator:

Barbara Griffith, Communications Consultant and Former Senior Communications Officer for Fort Worth Independent School District

12:15 –1:15 p.m.

Lunch (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

1:30 – 2:30 p.m.

Didn't you read the thing??!?

Writing so busy people read and respond

Professor Todd Rogers from Harvard University teaches how to write so busy families, staff, and other stakeholders read, understand, and respond. Everyone is busy. That's why we skim emails, talking points, social media posts, forms, websites, documents, and nearly everything else.

In this session, attendees will learn the practical cognitive and behavioral science of communication, and the six actionable principles it generates. This session will make your writing more effective—and kinder—by teaching how to write in a way that's easier to read. The session concludes with an [actionable checklist](#) and this [AI email coaching tool](#).

Presenter:

Todd Rogers, Weatherhead Professor of Public Policy
Harvard University

2:30 – 3:30 p.m.

Work Smarter Not Harder: Using AI to Work More Efficiently

Surveys indicate that two-thirds of communicators are utilizing AI technology, with 70% calling it a game-changer. A panel of urban school communicators will provide specific examples of how they are using AI for content creation, media relations, social media, and external and internal communications. They will also discuss how AI is improving their overall efficiency and productivity.

Moderator:

Greg Toppo, Former national education reporter for *USA Today* and author

Panelists:

Emma Garrett-Nelson, Chief Communications Officer
Colorado Department of Education

Fermin Leal, Chief Communications and Community Relations Officer, Santa Ana Unified School District

Marisol Ramos-Lopez, Chief of Communications & Intergovernmental Affairs, Rochester City School District

3:30 – 4:00 p.m.

Refresh, Reflect & Plan

This session will help you pause, reflect, and integrate the insights you've gained while setting clear intentions for what you want to accomplish next. Through guided meditation and mindful goal-setting exercises, connect with your professional vision and create actionable steps that build on today's learning and maximize tomorrow's opportunities.

Presenter:

Karianne Michelle, Founder & CEO, Lofti

4:00 p.m.

Adjourn

5:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Cocktail Reception

Johnny Pistolas

2333 18th St NW

Washington, DC 20009

(A 10-minute walk from the Hilton, in the culturally diverse Adams Morgan neighborhood known for its eclectic dining scene and nightlife)

Sponsors: Apptegy

Finalsite

ParentSquare

SchoolMint

Saturday, July 19

7:30 – 10:00 a.m.

Registration (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

8:00 – 9:00 a.m.

Breakfast (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

Sponsor: PowerSchool

Barbara Griffith Communications

9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

The Social Media Workshop (Tenleytown, 1st floor)

9:00 – 9:45 a.m.

Beyond the Algorithm: Building Authentic Engagement and Explosive Growth on Social Media

Social media can feel overwhelming, especially with so many new platforms emerging and organic growth becoming more challenging due to ever-changing algorithms that prioritize paid content. This session will share the practical strategies and insights used at Florida's Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) to achieve real growth and engagement. OCPS has seen a 23% follower growth in 2024, now reaching nearly 200,000 followers across Facebook, Instagram, X, and LinkedIn. Attendees will learn how to develop an upbeat, engaging voice that connects with a diverse audience, balancing important information with engaging content. We'll demonstrate how to connect with student audiences on Instagram, creating relatable content that encourages engagement.

Presenters:

Scott Howat, Chief Communications Officer & President of the Foundation for Orange County Public Schools

Jason Smith, Director, Public Relations, Orange County Public Schools

9:45 – 10:30 a.m.

Gen Z is Watching: Rethinking School Branding for the TikTok Generation

In an era where attention spans are short and creativity drives engagement, school districts must rethink their messaging to reach Gen Z where they are, through short-form video platforms. This session will explore how to build a student-first social media strategy that is authentic, engaging, and grounded in your district's core values. Using real-world examples from Denver Public Schools, attendees will see how one large urban district successfully shifted its approach to better connect with Gen Z. You'll learn best practices for content creation, student collaboration, trend anticipation, and platform-specific storytelling. Walk away with a practical checklist for producing consistent, on-brand content plus 10 proven storytelling formats that spotlight student stories and transform everyday school moments into scroll-stopping stories.

Presenter:

Javier Ibarra, Sr. Manager, Media & Public Relations
Denver Public Schools

10:30 – 10:45 a.m.

Coffee Break

10:45 – 11:45 a.m.

Responsible AI for Urban School Communicators

In an era of deepfakes and “hallucinated” facts, district PR teams must adopt AI without sacrificing trust. Visiting Scholar Bianca Prade distills the essentials:

- Practical AI workflows that shave hours off content creation
- Ethics checkpoints for data privacy, bias, student safety and misinformation
- A quick-start governance checklist—plus free tools you can test on Monday

Presenter:

Bianca Prade, Visiting Scholar, George Washington University

Drawn from her forthcoming GWU graduate course, *Strategic Communications & AI Ethics*, Bianca tailors best-practice frameworks to K-12 realities.

Noon – 1:00 p.m.

Lunch

1:00 – 1:45 p.m.

Launch Like a Pro: Untangling the Web for a Savvy Tech Rollout

Launching a new website or communications platform doesn't have to be a headache—or a hot mess. Join the Dallas ISD Communications team and Jeannine Richardson from Finalsight for a lively session that transparently pulls back the curtain on how to make tech rollouts smooth, strategic, and actually... fun, despite chaotic moments that can ensue when reimagining your website. This session is built for school PR pros who want to lead with confidence when the next big tech change hits. From managing internal breakdowns to getting your whole district in sync, we'll share the real talk on what works, what flops, and how to keep staff, families, and stakeholders informed— even excited—every step of the way. You'll walk away with smart frameworks, communication strategies, and rollout tips you can apply whether you're prepping for a full platform overhaul or just trying to get your schools on the same digital page.

Presenters:

Robyn Harris, Deputy Chief of Communications
Dallas Independent School District

Anastasia Reed, Executive Director, External
Communications
Dallas Independent School District

1:45 – 2:30 p.m.

Telling the Story Your Way

Telling your story in a crowded digital and broadcast space can be difficult, especially when you're competing with coverage of more than 25 school districts in your general media market. Birmingham City Schools uses a unique blend of social media, targeted pitching and paid content in area media to share information and engage with students, parents and stakeholders. The district has experienced several weeks with earned media valued at more than \$750,000. The district has strategically placed branding ads on network television and had three ads in the 2025 Super Bowl airing on the local FOX station.

Presenter:

Sherrel Stewart, Communications Officer
Birmingham City Schools

2:30 – 2:45 p.m.

Coffee Break

2:45 – 3:30 p.m.

Mastering Difficult Communications

Unlock the power of effective communication in your school with "Mastering Difficult Communications." This session delves into strategies for navigating sensitive conversations around academics, behavior, and hygiene, fostering trust and strengthening school-home partnerships. Learn how to establish genuine two-way communication, ensuring all voices are heard and valued. Develop a proactive plan for addressing challenging topics with cultural empathy and a student-centered approach, promoting understanding and collaboration. Equip yourself with the best practices for crafting a comprehensive crisis response plan to ensure safety and maintain community trust during challenging times. Leave this session ready to communicate with confidence and build a more supportive school environment.

Presenters:

Emily Worrell, Director of Communications & Marketing
Wawasee Community School Corporation

Justin Robinson, Director of Communications
Hickman Mills C-1 Schools

Susan Vernon-Devlin, Executive Director, Media Relations
and Crisis Communications, Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Schools

Scott Howat, Chief Communication Officer, Orange County
Public Schools

Addison Davis, Partner, Former District Superintendent
Strategos Group

Jay Klanfer, SVP - Sales, ParentSquare

3:30– 4:15 p.m.

You're Not a Recruiter... And That's Okay: When to Call in the Pros

District communications and HR teams are being asked to run high-stakes recruitment campaigns without the time, tools, or training to do it effectively. In this session, Sacramento City Unified School District's Chief of Communications will share how the district approached its teacher and student recruitment challenges by bringing in external support. We'll walk through what wasn't working, what changed, and why it made a difference. The conversation will also explore common patterns across large districts and highlight what effective recruitment marketing actually looks like. Attendees will walk away with clear signals to watch for and a better sense of when it makes sense to bring in expert help.

Presenters:

Brian Heap, Chief of Communications, Sacramento City
Unified School District

Matt Coates, Chief Evangelist, SchoolMint

4:15 p.m.

Adjourn

Attire for the Conference: Business Casual

Please **bring** a sweater, blazer, or wrap because the hotel meeting room may be chilly.