

Minnetonka Public Schools Communications Team
Launching a Leader:

Communications Strategy for Connecting New Superintendent David Law
with the Minnetonka Public Schools Community



District/Organization Name and Contact Information:

Minnetonka Public Schools
5621 County Road 101
Minnetonka, MN 55345
952-401-5000

communications@minnetonkaschools.org

Entry Category:

Special Communication Project/Campaign

Number of Communications Staff: 5

Size of District: 11,250

Synopsis

In November 2021, Dr. Dennis Peterson announced his retirement from Minnetonka Public Schools, where he had served as superintendent for 21 years. At the time of his announcement, he was the longest serving superintendent in the U.S., with more than 50 years of experience in the role.

The news of his retirement launched a rigorous, nationwide search for Minnetonka’s next leader – who the Minnetonka School Board found in a local Minnesotan, the current Anoka-Hennepin superintendent David Law, JD. Mr. Law began his superintendency with Minnetonka Schools in July 2022.

The process of launching a new leader always requires a thoughtful planning process, but to launch one into a community with a history of such a longstanding and successful superintendent added an extra layer of importance, creativity and depth to such an effort.

Leading up to and throughout the 2022-23 school year, the Minnetonka Schools communications team has collaborated with Superintendent Law to use a strategic mix of in-person events and community engagement meetings, social media, digital channels, print and video communications methods, along with earned media coverage, to anchor him firmly into the Minnetonka Schools community and to connect him with its constituents, building confidence in his ability to both continue the district’s history of excellence and to reach new levels of it.

“We are thrilled that David Law will be taking the helm here at Minnetonka Schools. He is an experienced, proven leader who we believe will help us to harness and preserve the focus on child-centered excellence across our school system and at the same time will infuse new energy into all we do as a district.”

- Chris Vitale, Minnetonka School Board Chair (2022)



Supt. Law (center) stands with past Minnetonka Schools superintendents Dr. Don Draayer (left) and Dr. Dennis Peterson (right) at the groundbreaking event for the school district’s new VANTAGE/ MOMENTUM building in May 2022. The building will house classes for Minnetonka High School’s advanced professional studies and design and skilled trades programs. This was Mr. Law’s first public event as part of the Minnetonka Schools community.

Project Summary

RESEARCH

Immediately following Dr. Peterson’s announcement of retirement in November 2021, the Minnetonka Schools communications team began researching best practices in leadership change communications. Consulting NSPRA resources, industry-wide resources and drawing on past team member experiences with launching new leaders in various education, corporate and nonprofit settings, a draft strategy with target audiences and a cadence of communication methods was developed. The team was well-prepared when a new leader was announced.

The Minnetonka School Board’s [superintendent search process](#) served as a rich research opportunity for the communications team to gain insight about the community’s hopes for the district. To support a new leader in anchoring connections in the community, it was vital for the team to amplify the ways the leader resonated with the community’s desires.

The Board’s hired search firm conducted focus group sessions and surveys with hundreds of district constituents (including students, parents, teachers, staff and community members) to create a [leadership profile](#), which steered the superintendent search process and brought forth key qualities the community sought. Search firm consultants provided personality/leadership profile information for superintendent candidates, and communications team members attended all public interview sessions to learn about the personality and leadership style of each candidate – getting a sense for candidates’ personal brands and values.

David Law was selected as the district’s next superintendent in April 2022, and the work to personalize the drafted plan began. The Minnetonka Schools Executive Director of Communications began regular meetings with the incoming superintendent to learn his communications style, strengths and goals, as well as to help him learn more about the people and programs that make Minnetonka Schools unique. The Minnetonka Schools communications team also met informally with the Anoka-Hennepin communications team during the transition, to gain insights about how to best support Superintendent Law.

By synthesizing all of these data sources, the communications team tailored a strategy to bring forth the strong traits that mirrored what the community was looking for in a leader, and to help the new superintendent craft the appropriate message for each audience, for each project, each outreach and engagement and each event.

Leadership Profile - Minnetonka

- A RELATIONSHIP builder with all, with exceptional INTERPERSONAL skills
- Highly PERSONABLE, and able to make tough DECISIONS and demonstrates SOUND JUDGEMENT and INTEGRITY
- A leader fully INVESTED in the Minnetonka community, ACCESSIBLE and VISIBLE, and an ADVOCATE for belonging, diversity, equity, and inclusion
- A UNITER who ENGAGES and LISTENS to all stakeholders, considering diverse viewpoints as part of the decision-making process and clearly COMMUNICATES the rationale for the decision
- A VISIONARY LEADER who can clearly ARTICULATE continuous EXCELLENCE and is able to FACILITATE plans for greater cognitive and social-emotional/well-being growth
- An EXPERIENCED and SUCCESSFUL administrator who is FINANCIALLY savvy, with strong MANAGERIAL and DELEGATION skills that bring about the best in others
- An INCLUSIVE and COLLABORATIVE decision maker



PLANNING

Goals and Objectives. The underlying goal for all communications was to:

1. Support the establishment and growth of community trust in Superintendent David Law; and therefore,
2. Support the continued growth of community trust in Minnetonka Public Schools, most importantly, regarding its leadership and direction.

Target Audiences. The audiences for the communications strategy included every one of the district's constituents – from students and parents to teachers and staff, local residents, and legislators, as well as the educational community at the state- and national-level. Because of the broad nature of the strategy's audience, an implementation plan hubbed in owned media (including the District's website, in-house videos, e-newsletters, email communications and social media channels) was crucial. Unified storytelling on owned channels would serve as a strong base for all other communication avenues.

Message Development. The heart of the team's planning was the work to find the sweet spot where Superintendent Law's brand of authentic, relationship-driven leadership resonated with the community's desires for a strong leader with integrity and a vision of excellence for all students (as epitomized in the [leadership profile](#) created in the superintendent search process). To effectively connect Superintendent Law to the school community, it was important that all communications amplified and brought forward those qualities.

The communications team worked alongside the superintendent to develop a central theme for the year to unify all communications efforts: "Excellence in How We Live, Lead and Learn."

The theme tied together elements of Superintendent Law's personal leadership style and Minnetonka Schools' perennial focus on nurturing academic excellence for all students. It also gave a nod to his national leadership with AASA and laid the groundwork for goal-setting, as the Minnetonka School Board set its to the [three goals for the district](#) (approved in January 2023 and to be implemented throughout the next 18 months).



The communications strategy the team developed showcased the attributes from the leadership profile that the superintendent embodied, particularly by harnessing Superintendent Law's friendly, knowledgeable and caring presence in owned channels—such as the District website, videos and a new Superintendent Instagram account—that would feel personal to audiences, compelling the many, differentiated community audiences to have a unified, positive experience in “meeting” the superintendent, even if they never met him in person.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Minnetonka communications team worked across earned, shared and owned channels to reach the wide variety of key constituencies consistently. Efforts focused on sharing stories that scaffolded back to the key message theme, grounded in the ways Superintendent Law's leadership embodied "Excellence in How We Live, Lead and Learn."

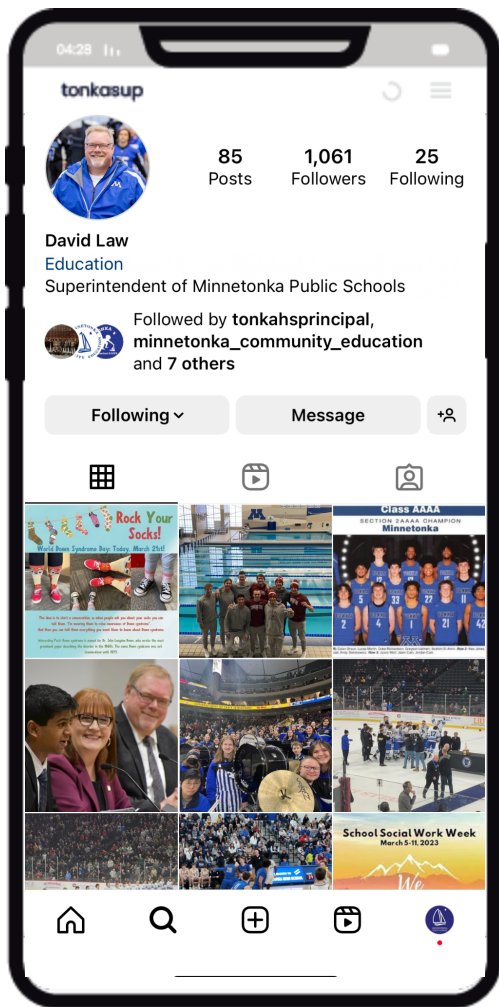
Owned Channel: Community Leadership and Engagement. A community engagement strategy included introducing him to various key influencers and influential groups, with support from Board members and past Board members. Superintendent Law joined key professional groups local to the school district, including the Excelsior Morning Rotary to connect with business leaders. As a part of these groups, he both represents Minnetonka Public Schools to the community and is able to glean insight into the community's needs and desires.

The superintendent began participating in monthly meetings with the mayors of the cities the school district encompasses and conducts outreach/meetings with local legislators. Initial meetings with past School Board members and long-time school supporters and volunteers, Booster Club leads, local parent organizations, key committee leads and current Board members have served as grounding experiences to anchor him within the community. Throughout the school year, he has visited local senior citizen homes and conducted meetings with city senior citizen organizations to build connections with that audience, and he has attended school events, games and concerts to connect with students. The communications team has organized several of these efforts and has provided presentations and communications in support of these efforts, as well.

The communications team worked alongside the superintendent to frame, organize and provide guidance and support for staff events, such as the late-summer administrative council retreat and the "Back to School" event for all staff, centered on the theme of "Excellence in How We Live, Lead and Learn."

Superintendent Law (center) connects with students while attending a community building event at Minnetonka High School.





Owned and Shared Channel: Social Media. The communications team launched a new Instagram account, [@tonkasup](#), to support the establishment and growth of community trust in the superintendent and district by providing an avenue for sustained positive connection to David Law’s vision for excellence and leadership in Minnetonka Schools. Using the account, Superintendent Law has been able to share about the successes and growth of the district through a superintendent’s lens, which differentiates it from the district-level Instagram account.

The communications team partnered with Superintendent Law in the launch and ongoing support of his account, providing training, counsel and content. Posts are scheduled organically, usually 2-4 per week, to showcase the many ways Superintendent Law is showing up and celebrating students and staff in the district.

The team worked with the superintendent to reenvision his Twitter account, [@DLawSuper](#), as a way for him to amplify stories from within the Minnetonka community (such as retweeting Minnetonka teachers) and to remain connected to other audiences as a thought leader in education.

Owned Channel: Digital Media. The team built out a new [Superintendent webpage](#) for David Law on the district website. It included a video welcome message, bio, photo gallery, contact information and links to both his Instagram and Twitter accounts. When he was announced as the new superintendent in spring 2022, and again when he began his position in July, welcome announcements were prominently featured on the district’s homepage banner and linked back to a feature news story about the new superintendent. David Law was integrated across the district’s digital platform the day he started, seamlessly adding him into dozens of website pages, including the Minnetonka School Board and District Leadership sections of our website.

Content about David Law was also added to the district’s interactive digital display platform, Touch Pro, which provides an immersive, viewbook-like experience to students, parents and community members and features photos and biographies of district leaders.

Owned Channel: Print Publications. Feature stories about David Law were written for both of Minnetonka Public Schools’ signature print publications, the [Minnetonka Alumni Magazine](#)

(mailed to more than 30,000 alumni across the country) and the [Annual Report](#) (mailed to every resident in the school district and to all open-enrolled families).

Owned Channel: Video. The communications team led with video as an immediate, personal way for the community to connect with Superintendent Law. On his first day of leadership in July, a “[First Day](#)” video was created and shared with students, parents and staff.

Quarterly update videos from the superintendent have been shared with Minnetonka students, parents and staff via email, as well as on multiple social media channels and video platforms.

- [Back to School Update](#)
- [End of Quarter 1 Update](#)
- [End of Semester 1 Update](#)

Superintendent Law is featured in the district’s [Vision Video](#), based on the Minnetonka School Board’s vision for the district. In it, he delivers the impactful final line — “We are always changing our thinking because *they*... (several student faces are shown here) change ours.”

Earned Channel: Traditional Media. Newspapers, online news sites, radio stations and TV stations have been important partners in establishing Superintendent Law as part of the Minnetonka community. In addition to dozens of articles that resulted from the [initial press release](#), the communications team connected with the local district paper (Sun Sailor) to share an [in-depth interview with Superintendent Law](#) before the start of the school year, which ran on the front page in late August. The team has supported Superintendent Law in media opportunities throughout the school year in publications and articles relevant to the district and his leadership.

Conclusion

We have found the investment of time and effort up front, to create a plan of engagement and to develop strong, relevant communication vehicles and opportunities that meet the superintendent's style and brand and that exemplify the co-created theme of "Excellence in How We Live, Lead and Learn" have been critical in establishing the superintendent in the Minnetonka Public School District. The launch of the superintendent has been a huge success, and the effort has been accomplished with minimal cost. Over the past year, we've seen a marked increase in the amount of trust, excitement and engagement with Superintendent Law by students, parents, staff and community members.

While measuring positive sentiment—in a person, and in an organization—is a complicated and ongoing process, we have clearly seen both tangible and intangible evidence that we have made significant strides in achieving our endeavor of launching him well and setting him up for success wherever we had an ability to assist.

EVALUATION

When looking at benchmarked metrics, we can see clear engagement from our community. Here are a few examples:

- Superintendent Law's @tonkasup Instagram account has grown to more than 1,000 followers in the eight months since its launch.
- His quarterly Superintendent update videos have been viewed more than 10,000 times, across various digital platforms.
- The Superintendent's webpage has been viewed more than 2,700 times since July.
- Superintendent Law's welcome announcement feature story has been viewed 1,500 times.

Similarly, there are many intangible measures of progress that we looked at when determining the success of Superintendent Law's launch. Here are a few examples:

- Consistently positive social media comments about Superintendent Law.
- Regular email communication from parents, students and community members expressing their appreciation and enthusiasm.
- Trust has been built and in some cases rebuilt with key constituents through personal email, phone and one-on-one meetings with Superintendent Law.
- Frequent requests for Superintendent Law's insight on key District and community issues.

Later this spring, the District will conduct a community sentiment survey through a third-party agency, and within the next few years, a referendum vote will take place. The results of these efforts will also serve as important evaluation markers in the levels of community trust

established and nurtured toward both Superintendent Law and the Minnetonka Public School District as a whole.

NEXT STEPS

Community meet and greets will continue, as well as meetings and outreach with local legislators. Periodic video updates will continue, and the communications team is launching a podcast this spring that will feature Superintendent Law connecting with and highlighting different members of the Minnetonka Schools community.

The communications team has seen the results that pre-planning, harnessing all of a district's engagement vehicles, events and opportunities, tuning in to the new superintendent's brand and style, and bringing together staff, Board members, students, parents and community members can make in the launch of a new superintendent. As districts throughout the country are faced with the task of launching a new leader, and in replacing a beloved leader who is retiring, this model will serve them well in developing and implementing a successful launch plan for their new superintendent.



Supt. Law and Minnetonka High School Principal Jeff Erickson greet crowds as part of the annual Minnetonka Homecoming Parade in September 2022.