



Barb Olson, APR
School/Community Relations Director
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General professional bio

- Osseo Area Schools, 2008-present
- Westonka Public Schools, 1998-2008
- Earned APR in 2011
- MinnSPRA member since 1998. Former board member; have volunteered in various capacities
- MA in Speech-Communications, University of Minnesota
- BA in French/International Studies, Iowa State University

1. What qualities and attributes would you bring to the MinnSPRA Board?

- Strong leadership and organizational skills
- Strategic and outcome-focused
- A champion for racial equity
- Dedicated to MinnSPRA and its members, and want to see it/them thrive
- Sense of humor and a general non-anxious presence

2. How can public relations professionals advance our communications management role in schools?

- In two words: Contribute value.
- Provide perspectives that add value to the leadership conversation.
- Demonstrate trustworthiness. Be sincere, dependable and competent.
- Say yes. Offer to help, then do an outstanding job.
- Show what you know. Write solid RACE/RPIE-based communication plans; offer communications support to others.
- Be the calm in the storm during a crisis. Remain positive and provide constructive support.

3. What do you consider to be the major issues facing school public relations professionals today?

- Telling compelling stories that instill confidence in public education, in general, and in our local schools, specifically;
- Building and maintaining community trust;
- Creating messages that pierce through the clutter;
- Advancing racial equity.



Tami DeLand
Director of Community Engagement and Communications
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Tami DeLand is the Director of Community Engagement and Communications for St. Cloud Area School District 742, a district of nearly 10,000 students servicing nine communities. A former teacher in the district, Tami is passionate about fostering public awareness, understanding, trust and support for St. Cloud Area Schools. Tami's efforts at 742 include a Communications Audit in 2014, two referendum campaigns, a first-time 742 Expo at the Rivers Edge Convention Center, and a 742 Proud marketing campaign.

Tami's experience includes eight years as Community Manager at the Minnesota School of Business-St. Cloud where she connected college students with staff and community partners for meaningful service projects and applied learning experiences. She also maintained the college website, social media accounts and blogged for the school.

Tami has been a long-time resident of St. Cloud and is active on several community organizations where she often assists in communications and marketing strategies. They include: Board of Directors for Anna Marie's Alliance, Board of Directors for St. Cloud Downtown Council, St. Cloud Rotary, Partner for Student Success and United Way.

1. What qualities and attributes would you bring to the MinnSPRA Board?

I believe I could bring creativity, passion and focused effort to the MinnSPRA board. I have been very impressed with this organization since I first became a member and would appreciate the opportunity to contribute to its success. My skills which may further the mission of the organization include writing, creative planning and relationships. I am a high-energy person and don't require a lot of sleep! 😊

2. How can public relations professionals advance our communications management role in schools?

I believe one way PR professionals can advance our communications management role in schools is to be omnipresent and genuine in offering support. It is essential to remember our internal communication responsibilities as well as our external efforts. Teachers, administrators and other staff will understand and value our role more if they are included in regular two-way communications. Emphasizing communication as a part of every department's agenda is an important goal as well.

3. What do you consider to be the major issues facing school public relations professionals today?

I believe that a major issue facing PR professionals today is the nature of rapidly changing communications and technologies. Education is notoriously slow in adapting to change, and understanding new technologies and communication strategies can't afford to wait for the system to catch up. It is a challenge to have to feel as if, as a communications professional, you have to lobby for your work to be supported by those who may be operating in an outdated mindset. In addition, hiring skilled communications professionals can be a challenge.

Another major challenge facing PR professionals in schools is rapid change in media itself. Local newspapers are losing their influence as reporters become a thing of the past and online “journalism” becomes the rule. (However, it also creates an opportunity for our own district news outlets—social media, website, blogs—to tell the story from a district point of view.)



Toya Stewart Downey
Interim Director of Communications, Marketing and Development
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Toya Stewart Downey has worked for Saint Paul Public Schools since October 2011. She started as the Marketing and Media Relations Coordinator, moved to the role of Assistant Director and in July 2016 was appointed to the interim director role.

Before moving into school communications she worked for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe as a writer and editor for the tribe's newspaper for two years. Prior to that she spent her career as a print journalist who worked at several metro newspapers including The Dallas Morning News, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, The Kansas City Star and others.

As a reporter at The Dallas Morning News, Toya covered several major school districts including Arlington ISD, Garland ISD and Dallas ISD. Back then she thought that if she ever left journalism then a career in school PR might be a good fit.

She often tells people that if she had known then what she knows now about public schools then she would have been a better education reporter.

Toya grew up in Minneapolis and Robbinsdale and attended public schools in both districts. She graduated from Minneapolis North Community High School. She attended the University of Minnesota (U of M) where she earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, Rhetoric and African American Studies. She later returned to the U of M for graduate school when she left journalism. Her Master of Arts Degree is in Health Journalism with a minor in Public Health.

1. What qualities and attributes would you bring to the MinnSPRA Board?

I would be able to represent the perspective of working in a large urban district that has a high population of students who come from low-income homes, who are multi-lingual and who may be considered highly mobile.

I recently heard that in many of our schools it's uncommon for students to keep the same friends because they move to different schools each year within the district. That's not true for every school or student in SPPS, but it was eye-opening to me. My youngest son, who is a fourth grader in the Hopkins district, has been at the same school, with his same friends since Pre-K.

I would bring the perspective of a former journalist -- one who asks thoughtful questions and seeks thorough responses. As a multi-racial woman I would bring my life experiences to the table and be able to discuss and address topics that may be considered hard to talk about - such as race and what it means to seek racial equity.

Though I've been in school communications for over five years, I still consider myself to be a learner in this field, so I would ask questions that perhaps other, more experienced board members may not.

2. How can public relations professionals advance our communications management role in schools?

I think this question would depend on the size of the district and the vision of its leaders. But, one thing we can do is create standards and expectations and share those broadly with schools. For example, in SPPS we created a marketing toolkit. It shows schools and departments how to create newsletters, brochures, letters and other products that reflect the district branding. We can model strong, effective communication.

We can and should use plain language in everything we do and we should encourage others to do the same.

3. What do you consider to be the major issues facing school public relations professionals today?

Lack of resources and funding are a couple of the biggest issues I've experienced. Social media is another issue -- it's great when we need it, but it can also make our jobs harder because it spreads like wildfire and if the message is incorrect we have to manage and fix it. Finally, we have to teach people what effective communications looks like and why it matters. To do that, it takes time and resources - something we never have enough of.



Derrick Williams
Communication Specialist
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After nearly a decade in the newspaper industry as a reporter and editor, I realized the best part of the job was writing about the wonderful things happening in the schools and classrooms of the communities I covered. With that background as a journalist, and my degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls, I was hired as a communication specialist for the Anoka-Hennepin School District in 2014. Since then I've spearheaded our district's social media communications and managed our award-winning storytelling on all platforms.

1. What qualities and attributes would you bring to the MinnSPRA Board?

Having gotten my start in this profession just four years ago, I think I'm still considered to be among the group of new, fresh faces that have joined MinnSPRA recently — professionals who have new ideas and a different perspective and an excitement to learn and share. I'm also passionate about our work and passionate about the professional development and the supportive community MinnSPRA offers. All of those things combine, I think, to be of value for the board.

2. How can public relations professionals advance our communications management role in schools?

I think it's hard for school communication professionals to understand who represent the face of their school districts. Sometimes the nature of our jobs have us assuming we're the sharp end of the stick. After all, we write the messages and craft the statements and plans. But better equipping our staff with the tools they need to be effective messengers, and connecting with our students and sharing their stories — those are the things at the forefront of communication management in the schools, in my opinion.

3. What do you consider to be the major issues facing school public relations professionals today?

The changing face of our communities probably represents the biggest issue facing school public relations professionals. Effectively communicating to diverse audiences in engaging ways is a challenge. From the nuts and bolts of translating our websites and documents, to the cultural competency training we all need to understand the challenges facing all of our students and families — school public relations professionals have an opportunity to innovate and become leaders in this area.