



**Name: Toya Stewart Downey**

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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I've been a member of MinnSPRA since 2011 when I began my career in school communications at Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS). I was at SPPS for seven years as the marketing and media relations specialist, later the assistant director and then for the last two years of my tenure, I was the interim director of the Communications, Marketing and Development team. During my time at SPPS, I served on the MinnSPRA board of directors for a few years. After leaving SPPS in the fall of 2018 for another opportunity to serve as a director of communications and inclusion at a major arts organization, I returned to school PR in August 2020, and a month later, reconnected with MinnSPRA and then was asked to serve as a board member. Since rejoining the board, I've helped plan the Good Trouble PR professional development sessions.

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

As both a communications leader and a longtime practitioner of diversity, equity and inclusion, I always seek ways to create authentic messages that are clear, concise and focused on my audiences. While doing this work I always do it through an equity lens. As a board member, I would follow this same path -- while encouraging other board members to do the same and providing resources that may help in our efforts. As a former journalist, I tend to ask a lot of questions in an effort to seek clarity for my own understanding, and for others, too. I'm collaborative in my approach and thrive while working on a team. I look for ways to contribute to any group or organization I belong to.

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

One of the ways we can ensure that we are building understanding of our work is to look for ways to be stronger advocates of what we're doing and share how we can help improve communications for all stakeholders. We can do this by collaborating with other departments and with external partners. We need to create, build and maintain relationships so that we build trust and understanding. We should share best practices and resources. We can also seek ways to make systemic changes that have a broad impact for our organizations. I'm also a strong believer in networking, both internally and externally. So, by demonstrating the value and importance of our work I believe we can build understanding of the how and why communication should be a core management function.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?** The demands on a school communications professional are greater than ever as we try to navigate our new normal and how we deliver education. In the past year our work has changed considerably. We are charged with crafting messages and responding to topics, that in some cases, go beyond what used to be standard communications. Today, we are tasked with crafting messages for an audience that has become more polarized -- which has made our job a bit harder. This year alone, the amount of time and effort that was needed due to the impact of the global pandemic has been paramount in all of our efforts. We are experiencing increased demands to speak up and create messages about social justice by some of the youth and families in our districts, while others tell us to stay in our lane and not address some of these same issues.



**Name: Lyssa Campbell**

**Title: Director of Communications**

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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I started in school PR in February 2015 with Minnetonka Public Schools and was named Director of Communications at Orono Schools in March 2020. I have had the privilege of supporting students, staff, community members and administrators through a wide variety of communications projects--everything from managing marketing campaigns to celebrating student achievement. I became a member of MinnSPRA in early 2015 and have benefitted from the mentorship, sharing and friendship. My MinnSPRA colleagues encouraged me to complete my APR, one of the best decisions of my career.

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

I have held the MinnSPRA Treasurer position since July 2018 and am happy to serve one more year. This has been a great role, with a bird's-eye view into the workings of a professional association with the level of detail I enjoy. (Now's the time for you to consider running for the position of MinnSPRA Treasurer next spring (term begins July 2022) so there is plenty of time for training!)

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

We can advance our role as communication leaders by acting in an advisory role for fellow administrators and staff. This involves staying abreast of school PR issues on a state and national level, particularly through membership and engagement in MinnSPRA and NSPRA. I am frequently able to bring tough questions and broad perspectives to the table. Our collaborative discussions inform how we communicate as a district with our families and community.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?**

School PR professionals need a broad understanding of PR best practices, crisis communications, project management, school finance, referenda, marketing, equity, teaching and learning... everything! Couple that with the need to produce as a writer, editor, designer, photographer, videographer, and social media guru and you have the recipe for exhaustion. Given all that, we need to be creative in the ways we ask for help. We must also make time to enjoy the reason we're doing this work -- the kids, families and colleagues who do amazing things every day!



**Name:** Renae Reedy  
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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I have several years of in PR experience in government, non profit and private business. I moved to full time school PR in 2018. I joined MinnSPRA in 2016 and recently became a member of the MinnSPRA board to fill a vacancy.

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

I am a one-person department representing a district with a mix of suburban and rural families. I bring to the board the perspective from a district with limited communication resources and high communications/marketing needs.

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

As PR professionals, we need to be proactive with district leadership in helping them understand the importance of community engagement and transparency with families. In addition, as PR professionals we have the ability to help change the narrative, nudging education, families and students toward better outcomes and a better community.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?**

The depth and breadth of tasks that fall beneath the umbrella of school PR and communications makes it difficult for professionals to maintain focus and momentum. In addition, our direct working environment includes few or no peers in communications/PR, making it more challenging to learn and grow on the job.



**Name: Rachel Hicks**

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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I've served 100+ schools in three Minnesota school districts over the past 13 years. My favorite parts of the job are bringing out strong emotions in people through storytelling, challenging the status quo, and fighting for racial justice.

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

As a white woman, I consider it my responsibility to address systemic racism within our organization and school PR profession. I will work with my colleagues to de-center whiteness and address anti-Blackness with the goal of ensuring our professional organization is on the right side of history.

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

Communicators play a key role in framing the issues that decide everything from funding, policy, and all actions (and inactions) resulting in racial inequity. This work is about not only influencing decision-makers but challenging them.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?**

Major issues facing school PR professionals include lack of racial diversity within the profession, the need to build mindsets and skillsets to become anti-racists, and dismantling white supremacist strategy within our profession. For example, we have to stop saying "Know Your Audience," ... when your audience is mostly white, and mostly conservative, it's even more important to de-center whiteness and challenge the status quo.



**Name: Shawn Hogendorf**  
**Title: Communications Consultant**  
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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I have worked in the Office of Communications at Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) for more than seven years. My work at SPPS includes communications for large district projects, overseeing the district's digital communication systems (websites, app, special digital projects, etc.); managing crisis communications to families; school and department website programming and maintenance; and assisting with the district's social media content and strategy.

I have been a MinnSPRA member since 2014, and joined the MinnSPRA Board of Directors in November 2018.

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

If elected to the MinnSPRA Board, I would bring an understanding of best practices in community engagement, equity, project management, marketing and strategic communications for web and social media. My professional perspective is based on communicating to a diverse community of families in the urban setting of Saint Paul. I work hard to be an advocate for children, youth and families from marginalized groups in my professional role. I believe in transparency and advocate for the use of plain language to equitably communicate information to our families, staff and stakeholders.

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

My simple, short answer is assist with strategic communications planning. These plans require creating innovative and thoughtful campaigns that can be used across a variety of platforms to continuously share stories of student achievement, success and positive interactions in the community. These plans also require discipline to stay on message and be transparent. If done well, strategic communications plans can help increase enrollment, pass levy requests and improve a school and district's reputation online and throughout the community.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?**

Balancing the ever-increasing demand for school communications with limited resources due to budget cuts is a major issue for school PR professionals. The demands of the work require increasing--or at least maintaining--staffing levels to meet the complex communications needs of modern school districts. However, ongoing budget shortfalls make maintaining or increasing staffing levels challenging. I believe in advocating for the importance our work, and working to ensure that school PR professionals have a seat at the table for important decisions. An important aspect in advocacy is informing other school professionals about the critical work PR professionals do to support the goals of the district.

In today's world, clear, timely communications are necessary as the pandemic continues to impact our schools and families. In addition, the next school crisis is always right around the corner. Whether that crisis relates to online threats to student safety (fake or real), cyberbullying, negative social media campaigns to discredit school districts, or

inappropriate communications on digital platforms from students or staff – the information travels fast. I believe school PR professionals need to have strategic plans in place and use a variety of tools to get accurate, impactful messages to our stakeholders quickly.

In a divisive political climate full of fake news and half-truths, it is increasingly difficult to stay ahead of rumors and be available to craft strategic messages that separate fact from fiction. It is important to improve the district's credibility and trust in our communities. Negative campaigns can have a lasting impact, splitting school communities and tarnishing our districts' reputations. Social media is a powerful tool school PR professionals need to leverage to manage the narrative and protect our districts' standing in the community.



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**Please provide a brief description of your school PR work and MinnSPRA experience.**

I have been working in school communication for 7 years. I bring a background in non-profit marketing and management to my position. When I started at ISD 318, they were without a communication staff member and I was able to develop my position from the ground up.

I have been a member of MinnSPRA since 2017. As a member, I have tried to share my ideas and communications for my peers to use in an effort to streamline our work.

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

I'm especially excited about where we are going as an organization as we focus on racial equity through a communication lens. I think I bring not only a passion for that work, but a unique perspective in how our work can be applied in rural communities.

I am also passionate about school communications and the position that we hold. We have a positive impact on school districts and I think our stories go untold.

**2. How can public relations professionals advance our role as communication leaders and build understanding of communication as a core management function?**

Because our work is to tell the story of other people or our district as an entity, there is a lack of understanding of the role of communications staff. We need to begin by educating our own staff and administrators about our roles.

If anything good came out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's that many realized how integral we are to our organizations. We have to advocate for ourselves so that as the pandemic eases, there isn't a corresponding belief that our roles or responsibilities have eased as well.

**3. What major issues face school PR professionals today?**

The pandemic has created a culture where people place less value on learning from a teacher in person, in a brick and mortar school. In our district, we saw parents pull students for voluntary quarantines this spring. They did so to ensure that their child would not be required to quarantine for a close contact or contract COVID-19. However, these moves to distance learning were only temporary and were done solely so that a quarantine would not negatively impact the child's sports season or family vacation. Families are placing less importance on face-to-face learning and on education in general, resulting in lower enrollment and engagement from families.

In rural communities, enrollment and budget impacts are especially difficult. Our district has never been able to pass an operating levy. Even with our building referendum, we were able to pass our first question for two new elementary

schools by only 67 votes. I think the polarization of politics will only increase the difficulties we all see in passing referendums.

All of these budget impacts ultimately mean additional work for school PR professionals with smaller teams and tighter budgets, as we are often the first to be cut in lean years.