the leader in school communication

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FROM DISTORTION TO CLARITY

Empowering School Districts to Overcome False Information

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Educating students requires school districts to have a trusting relationship with their parents, school employees and the broader community.

When false information breaks down that trust, it doesn't just harm schools: It hurts students, too.

A Message from the NSPRA Executive Director

As school communications professionals, we are no strangers to the challenge of responding to misinformation and rumors. But today's landscape is unprecedented, with false information impacting school districts to an alarming degree. Through member surveys, insights shared at conferences and webinars, and nationwide research in dozens of school districts, NSPRA has uncovered a pervasive challenge: the spread of false information is a significant and costly issue affecting us all.

Nearly all of our members (96 percent) consider the spread of false information a problem for school districts, up from 81 percent since our last survey on the topic in 2020.

The growing problem of false information is draining not just staff time but also our school districts' relationships with their stakeholders. Eighty-three percent of survey respondents reported that it significantly increases the workload for communications staff. However, what is even more concerning is that most respondents (90 percent) report that the spread of false information is not just affecting their district's reputation in the community but also eroding confidence in district leaders (76 percent).

To fulfill their mission of educating students, school districts must have a trusting relationship with parents/caregivers, school employees and the broader community. When false information breaks down that trust, it doesn't just harm schools: It hurts students, too.

NSPRA is committed to identifying and supporting strategies that build bridges of trust between school districts and their communities. The rapid spread of false information cannot be solved by a single group alone, but this report contributes to a growing body of research on how to respond effectively.

NSPRA stands with education leaders and school communicators in working to overcome the spread of false information in school communities everywhere.

Sincerely,

Barbara M. Hunter, APR, *NSPRA Executive Director*

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NSPRA members receive access to this report with bonus content on overcoming false information.

Executive Summary

Between January 1 and 21, 2024, the National School Public Relations Association surveyed members to understand whether and how the spread of false information challenges school communicators today. That survey expanded upon a previous survey from 2020 on the same topic. With both member surveys, NSPRA aimed to proactively support school communicators with relevant data on false information and professional development programs that address the survey findings.

False Information and Growing Concerns in School Communities

A common understanding of terminology is helpful when reflecting on the 364 responses received to the 2024 survey. The term "false information" encompasses both **misinformation**, which is spread unintentionally, and **disinformation**, which is deliberately disseminated to deceive. Although the public frequently uses these terms interchangeably, NSPRA refers to both types under the umbrella term **false information** to simplify discussions around combating inaccuracies.

Survey questions were designed to gather insights to help NSPRA better understand how false information has affected public school districts in recent years.

Several trends emerged in the detailed survey results:

✓ **Concerns about false information have grown among school communicators over the last four years**, with a 15-percentage-point growth in those who see it as a critical issue (from 81 percent in 2020 up to 96 percent in 2024) and a 16-percentage-point growth in those who report facing direct challenges with it (from 62 percent in 2020 up to 78 percent in 2024).

✓ **Safety and policy issues are reported to be the most frequent subjects of false information.** This year, respondents said they most often encounter false information on policy matters like school regulations (69 percent) and safety concerns, including security threats (66 percent).

✓ **Some false information appears to be spread purposely with the intent to mislead.** Among survey respondents, 41 percent reported encountering false information campaigns deliberately aimed to deceive those in their school communities.

✓ **False information is spread online and in person.** Respondents ranked Facebook (91 percent) and word-of-mouth (79 percent) as the top channels for false information spread in their school communities, with other mediums showing a much lower spread rate of 9-38 percent.

✅ **False information is harmful and costly for districts.** More than half of respondents (65 percent) said they dedicate 1-4 hours weekly to addressing challenges caused by false information. They report that some of the key impacts of false information include harm to the district's reputation (89 percent), increased staff workload (83 percent) and diminished confidence in leadership (76 percent).

✅ **School communication professionals need more training and support to tackle false information effectively.** Most respondents (71 percent) believe in the effectiveness of efforts to counter false information. Yet, nearly half of them (46 percent) identify a need for professional development to equip them for these challenges.

A Better Understanding of False Information and How to Tackle It

NSPRA is the leader in school communication, and for this report, the association turned to the leaders in human psychology and social sciences to better understand false information. In recent years, numerous research studies have contributed to the national conversation on false information and its perils. This report provides a high-level summary of their top insights on dealing with false information.

For school public relations professionals, some of the most relevant insights shared by researchers on tackling false information are that:

- Different interventions for misinformation should be deployed under different circumstances.

- You can prevent misinformation from taking hold in the first place by pre-bunking.

- Encouraging media literacy helps reduce the spread of misinformation.

- Issuing corrections to false information has a minimal negative effect in reinforcing misinformation.

NSPRA has compiled its own easy-to-use guides on "Preventing False Information: Key Strategies for School Communicators" and deciding whether "To React or Not to React." Use them when discussing strategies for dealing with false information (see pages 9-10).

The False Information Landscape

SOURCES OF FALSE INFORMATION

False information can originate from many sources and spread through multiple channels, often complicating efforts to maintain accurate and reliable communication. Here are some of the primary sources of false information:

⚠ **Outdated information**: Facts or data that were accurate at one point but have since been updated or revised. The persistence of outdated information can lead to confusion, mistrust, and the unintentional spread of false information.

⚠ **Misinterpreted data**: Genuine information misunderstood or omitted from context can create misleading narratives. This often occurs when complex data, such as financial and procedural information, is oversimplified.

⚠ **Rumors and unverified claims**: Information based on hearsay and from unverified sources can spread rapidly, especially on social media platforms or via word of mouth.

⚠ **Deliberate false information**: Some content is created intentionally by individuals, groups or organizations to deceive, manipulate opinions or cause harm.

⚠ **Manipulated media**: Photos, videos and audio recordings can be altered or presented out of context to mislead viewers or listeners deliberately.

⚠ **Echo chambers**: Groups of like-minded individuals can gather online or in real life and amplify false information amongst themselves, creating echo chambers where false information is reinforced without exposure to corrective facts.

The spread of false information affects nearly every public and private institution today. We may think of this problem as a recent phenomenon, but the related term "fake news" has been used since the end of the 19th century, according to Merriam–Webster. A history of fake news by the Center for Information Technology and Society at the University of California Santa Barbara provides examples of false information being used to influence public opinion throughout history, particularly during the era of yellow journalism in the 1890s, when rival newspapers competed for audience share "through sensationalism and reporting rumors as though they were facts."

What is new is the speed at which false information can spread and wreak havoc on an organization's reputation, potentially derailing its mission. According to the University of California Santa Barbara, contemporary fake news differs from historical forms due to its rapid spread and significant impact, attributed to ideological interests or profit–driven individuals rather than traditional media outlets. It involves deliberate distortion and manipulation of news sources, as seen in instances where videos are altered to convey false narratives, often leading to serious repercussions.

Although the spread of false information is not a recent phenomenon, what is new is the speed at which false information can spread and wreak havoc on an organization's reputation, potentially derailing its mission.

Recent research shows that much of the public perceives false information as dangerous and increasingly looks to government institutions to solve the problem. A November 2023 survey by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), the Fourth Annual Disinformation in Society Report, states that 61 percent of Americans consider misinformation and 60 percent consider disinformation to be more significant threats to society than terrorism, border security, the budget deficit and climate change. Meanwhile, a Pew Research poll released in June 2023 showed that more than half of Americans (55 percent) want the U.S. government to take steps to restrict false information, up from 39 percent in 2018.

There are no simple solutions to the problem of false information, but responding effectively is in the public interest. Many organizations, including school districts, are just beginning to grasp how to effectively combat false information in today's digital era, where information can rapidly reach a broad audience. While NSPRA has identified several instances where association members' school districts successfully addressed false information, best practices for handling misinformation and disinformation remain an evolving aspect of the school communications profession.

Conclusion

Trust in institutions has reached historic lows, partly due to the proliferation of false information. As many survey respondents aptly noted, this issue transcends public school systems, highlighting the need for society-wide education on discerning accurate and false information.

While professional communicators are still learning how to best respond to the rapid spread of false information, NSPRA firmly believes that public school systems, given their deep engagement with constituents, can play a vital role in rebuilding trust.

We deeply appreciate and recognize the invaluable efforts of our members, who navigate the ever-evolving landscape of school communication amid growing challenges. By combating false information, they not only uphold the integrity of our educational institutions but also safeguard the trust and well-being of the communities we serve.

"Combating misinformation is critically important to the survival of public education and democracy. It is only getting more difficult with the advent of artificial intelligence. As professional communicators, it is our responsibility to develop effective strategies for identifying and debunking mis- and disinformation."

– NSPRA survey respondent

Preventing False Information:
Key Strategies for School Communicators

1 Establish a trusted source of information

Consistently provide accurate, timely, and transparent information. Your audience should see your communications as the primary, reliable source. Keep your community informed with regular updates. This reduces the likelihood of information gaps that can be filled by false information.

2 Monitor and respond quickly

Keep an eye on what is being said about your organization across various channels, including social media, forums, and traditional media. Address false information quickly to prevent it from spreading. This could involve issuing corrections, clarifications or providing additional context.

3 Engage in clear and effective communication

Use clear, concise language that is easily understood by your audience. Avoid jargon and overly complex explanations. Repetition helps reinforce the correct information and increases the likelihood of it being remembered.

4 Collaborate with credible partners

Work with trustworthy media outlets to disseminate accurate information and counteract false information. If applicable, collaborate with experts such as department chairs, financial advisors, architects and community leaders who can provide authoritative voices on specific issues.

5 Use social media wisely

Maintain an active and engaging presence on social media platforms where false information might spread. Correct false information on social media by providing facts and evidence but avoid confrontational or defensive posturing.

6 Empower and mobilize your community

Urge your audience to report instances of false information. Educate and empower members of your community to be advocates for accurate information.

7 Develop a crisis communication plan

Have a plan for responding to widespread or damaging false information. Anticipate potential false information scenarios and plan how to address them.

8 Be transparent and admit mistakes

If false information originates from an error on your part, acknowledge it promptly and correct it. Transparency builds trust. When your audience trusts you, they will likely turn to you for accurate information.

To React or Not to React?

Deciding whether to overlook or dispute false information is a nuanced decision that requires careful consideration. It's essential to consider the potential effects of false information and the advantages and drawbacks of addressing it.

WHAT SHOULD I MONITOR?

⚠️ If the false information is circulating within a tiny group and doesn't seem likely to spread or impact the larger community, it may be best to monitor the situation without directly engaging.

⚠️ Engaging with certain false information can unintentionally amplify and draw more attention. If addressing it publicly could give it more credibility or visibility, it might be best to avoid direct engagement.

⚠️ If the source of false information seems deliberately provocative, engaging can often be counterproductive. In these cases, the intent is often to elicit a response rather than genuinely misinform.

⚠️ In cases where the information landscape is rapidly changing, it may be wise to wait for more accurate and stable details before responding.

WHAT SHOULD I RESPOND TO?

💡 If false information is being widely shared and gaining traction, especially on social media or in the news, take steps to address it.

💡 Pay attention to false information that could harm students, staff or the community. This includes false information about safety, health and well-being.

💡 False information that could influence important decisions, such as school elections, policy changes or community relations, should be addressed.

💡 False information that could have legal implications or relates to compliance with regulations or policies must be addressed.
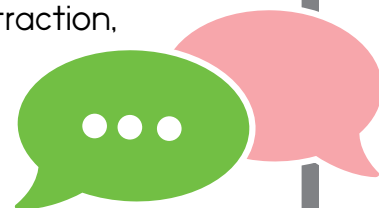
APPENDIX:

NSPRA Survey Detailed Findings

The spread of false information is a growing problem for school districts today:

96% | of respondents consider the spread of false information a problem for school districts today, up from 81% in 2020.

78% | of respondents have experienced a challenge caused by the spread of false information, up from 62% in 2020.

77% | of respondents are very concerned, somewhat concerned or concerned that their school system may face challenges related to false information in the future.
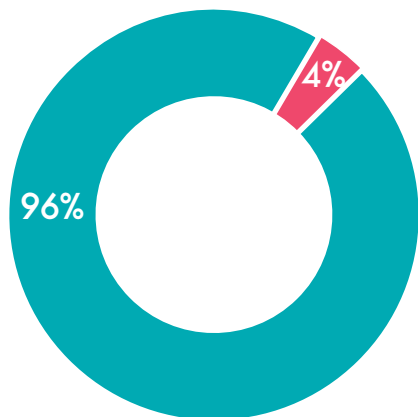
? Do you consider the spread of false information to be an issue for K–12 public school systems today?
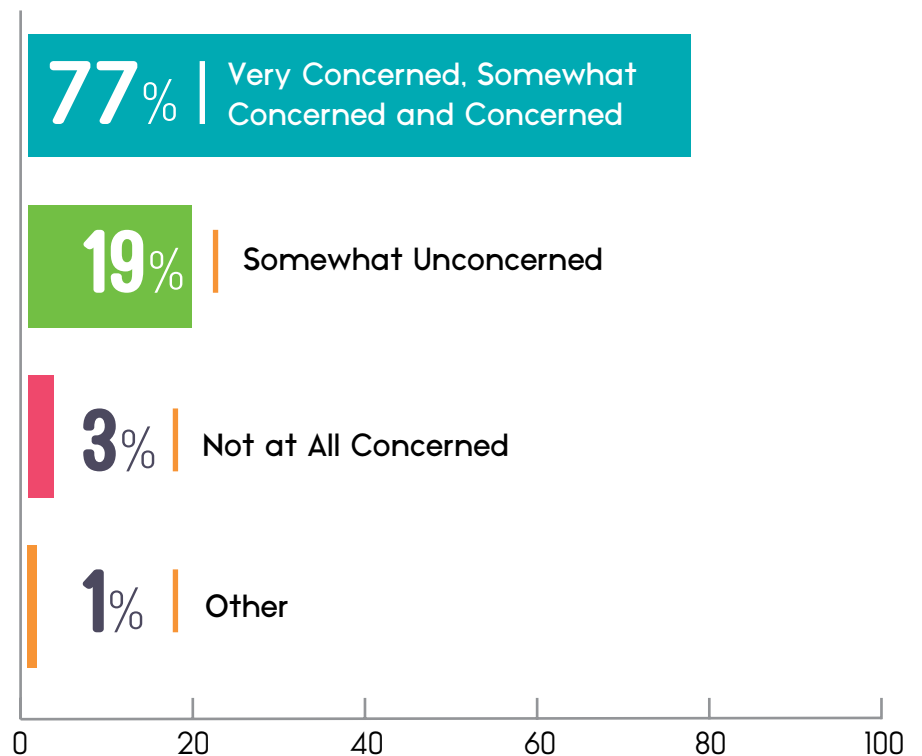
✓ **YES** | 96% ✕ **NO** | 4%
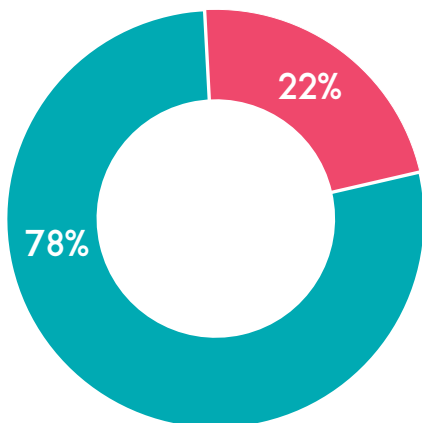
? Has your school system/organization experienced a challenge caused by spreading false information in its community within the last 12 months?

✓ **YES** | 78% ✕ **NO** | 22%

"The spread of false information, both deliberately and from those who believe the information to be true, has a terrible impact on K-12 education. It unjustly erodes public support for public education in a time when it is desperately needed."

"I think as AI gets used more and more, it will be hard to distinguish rumors from truth. We need to teach families how to examine false information and show them steps to verify it. This issue is only going to get worse."

? How concerned are you that your school system/organization may face challenges related to false information in the future?

77% | Very Concerned, Somewhat Concerned and Concerned

19% | Somewhat Unconcerned

3% | Not at All Concerned

1% | Other
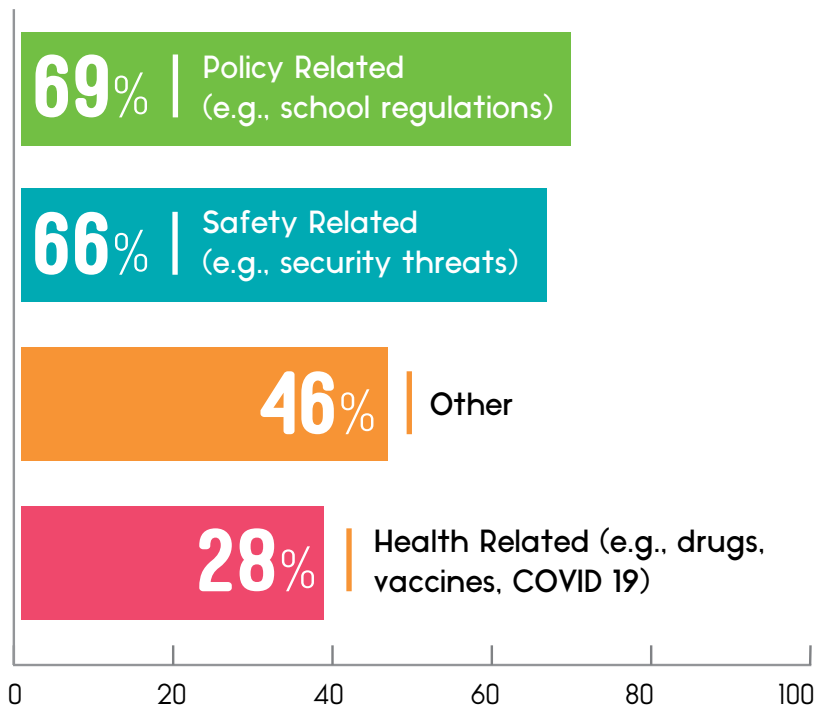
0   20   40   60   80   100

Information related to safety and policy are the two most common types of false information spread:

69% | of respondents have experienced the spread of false information around policy-related issues such as school regulations.

66% | of respondents have experienced the spread of false information related to safety, such as security threats.

? What type of false information has your school system most frequently encountered?

69% | Policy Related (e.g., school regulations)

66% | Safety Related (e.g., security threats)

46% | Other

28% | Health Related (e.g., drugs, vaccines, COVID 19)

0   20   40   60   80   100

"I am most worried about NATIONAL conversations being inappropriately applied to LOCAL districts. We have already had that happen and will likely again."

Forty-six percent of respondents reported the presence of various types of false information within their district, with 130 comments detailing a wide range of misinformation, including:

- ✓ Bathrooms and transgender students
- ✓ Bonds and other ballot measures
- ✓ Budget and funding information
- ✓ Bullying and fights in school buildings
- ✓ Cult activity
- ✓ Critical Race Theory
- ✓ Curriculum content
- ✓ Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives
- ✓ Litter boxes in school bathrooms
- ✓ Library books
- ✓ Personal information about Board of Education members
- ✓ Salaries and labor negotiations
- ✓ School closures and boundary changes
- ✓ Staff rumors and accusations
- ✓ Staff treatment of students

At least some false information is being spread purposely with the intent to mislead:

41% | of respondents indicate that the false information spread in their district was part of a deliberate effort to deceive.

35% | don't know whether the false information was inadvertent or deliberate.
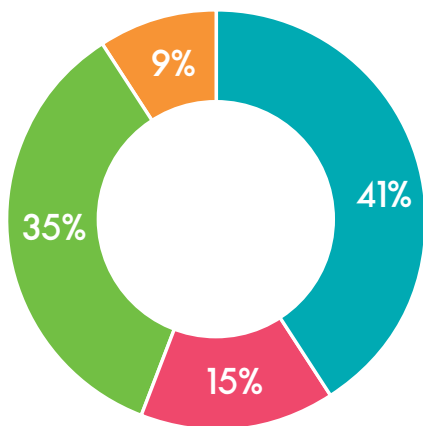
Was the false information spread in the community part of a deliberate, coordinated effort to deceive by people or groups who know the information to be untrue?

✓ **YES** | 41% ✕ **NO** | 15% ? **IDK** | 35% ⓘ **OTHER** | 9%

"We do not have proof, and it is not the case for all the misinformation, but some of it did seem part of a deliberate and coordinated effort."

Twenty-six respondents commented on whether the information was spread with the intent to mislead. Some said that the spread of false information was coordinated but indicated that many who spread it did not realize it was untrue. Others indicated a mixture of intentional and unintentional spreading.

Do you know the identity of the groups or individuals who deliberately spread the information?
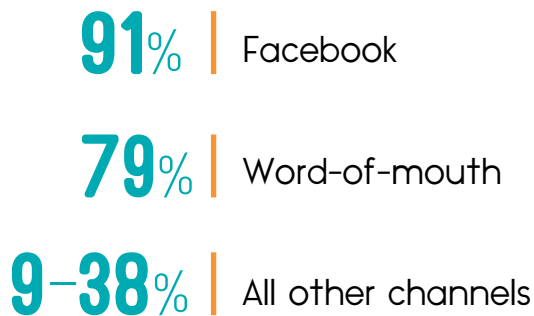
✓ **YES** | 89% ✕ **NO** | 11%
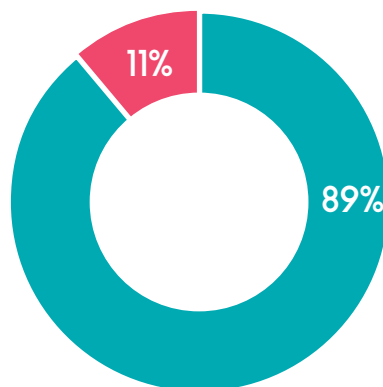
"We had conversations with media and pointed them to the groups perpetuating the misinformation and who directly caused the threats."
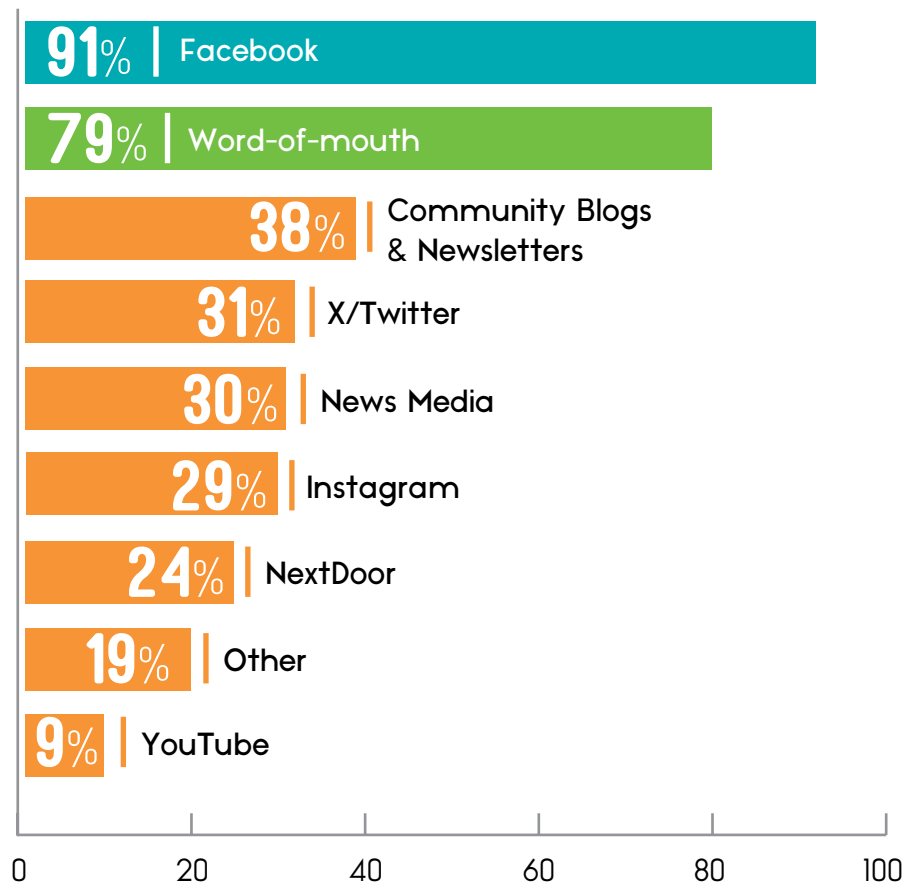
False information spreads in a variety of ways:

By far, the two channels most often used to spread false information were

91% | Facebook

79% | Word-of-mouth

9–38% | All other channels

Data from NSPRA's School Communication Performance Evaluation (SCOPE) Survey, which represents more than 12,000 respondents from 15 school districts and 13 states in the last 12 months, backs up the influence of word-of-mouth information. Ninety percent of the parents, employees and community SCOPE respondents indicated they learned information about their school district from others. Of those, 35 percent know it from a friend or family member.
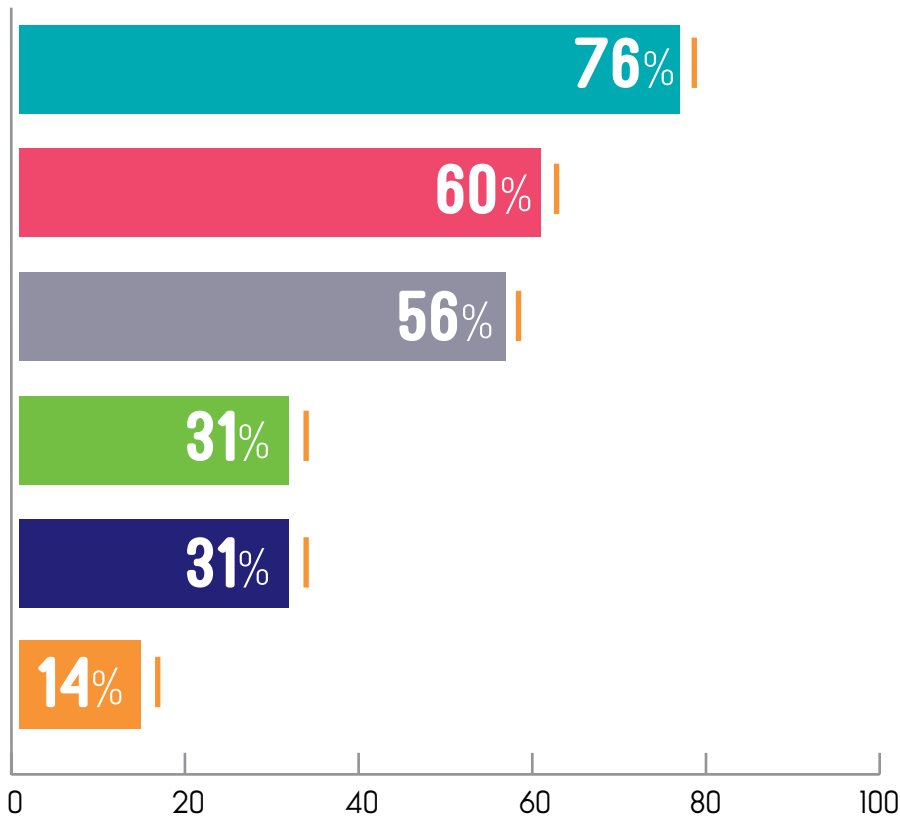
? What channels were used to spread the false information?

Channel	%
Facebook	91%
Word-of-mouth	79%
Community Blogs & Newsletters	38%
X/Twitter	31%
News Media	30%
Instagram	29%
NextDoor	24%
Other	19%
YouTube	9%

Fifty-four respondents listed other channels that were used to spread false information, including:

- ✓ Board meeting testimonies
- ✓ Community meetings
- ✓ Demonstrators with signs
- ✓ Emails
- ✓ Google reviews
- ✓ Homeowner associations
- ✓ Local newspaper
- ✓ Local politicians
- ✓ Pamphlets and leaflets
- ✓ Petitions
- ✓ Private social media groups
- ✓ Snapchat
- ✓ Talk radio
- ✓ TikTok
- ✓ Websites

? **What methods has your K-12 public school system/organization used to manage the spread of false information in the last 12 months?**

Thirty-nine respondents listed other strategies used to manage the spread of false information, including:

- Directing stakeholders away from social media and to the district website
- Holding community forums
- Holding one-on-one meetings with those spreading rumors, and if they decline, publicly sharing that they declined to meet
- Leaning on reasonable voices from the community to respond
- Encouraging people to attend board meetings
- Presenting factual information at community meetings
- Training district ambassadors
- Working with local organizations to ensure they have and share correct information
- Responding privately, not publicly, to social media posts
- Posting op-ed pieces

76% Creating talking points for leaders with corrections to false information

60% Issuing public statements with corrections to the false information

56% Ignoring the false information and focusing on our own messages

31% Hosting public meetings (in person or virtual) to correct false information

31% Maintaining a fact-checking/Q&A webpage to address rumors/false information

14% Other

False information is having a negative impact on school districts in multiple ways:

By far, the four most significant impacts to districts on false information are:

89% | the district's reputation in the community

83% | increased workload for staff

76% | confidence in district leaders

66% | of respondents spend 1-4 hours correcting or responding to false information weekly.

NSPRA's SCOPE Survey data shows that school districts have room for improvement in how much their communities trust the information they receive from the district. Only 67 percent of parents, 66 percent of employees and 49 percent of community members trust the information they receive from their school district, according to national survey averages.
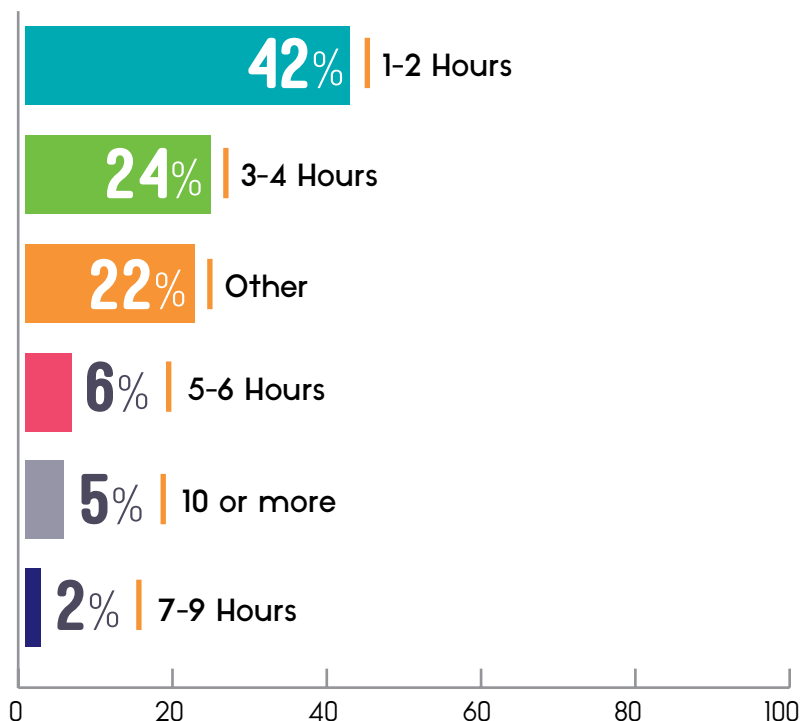
Fifty-seven respondents provided other comments, most focused on the variability of time spent depending on the situation.

"It comes in waves or cycles. It can be consuming for a week and then fade until the next 'crisis' is created."

"When one of these incidents occurs, it typically becomes my full-time job for the week."

? How much time do you estimate you or others on your communications team spend correcting or responding to false information each week?

42% | 1-2 Hours

24% | 3-4 Hours

22% | Other

6% | 5-6 Hours

5% | 10 or more

2% | 7-9 Hours

0   20   40   60   80   100

? What areas of your district's operations are most affected by the spread of false information?

89% | District's reputation in the community

83% | Increased workload for communications staff

76% | Confidence in District leaders

34% | Passing of bonds, referendums and other ballot measures

34% | Legal & ethical challenges

27% | Student enrollment

21% | Increased need for staff training

17% | Strain on District finances

8% | Other

0   20   40   60   80   100

"It is stressful and adds a lot more work to my plate. I spend a lot of time developing ways to share correct and positive information to help combat incorrect information/ perceptions in an indirect, less hostile way."

Twenty respondents gave other responses to the question about the impact of the spread of false information, including:

✓ Challenges in teacher recruitment and retention

✓ Diversion from the district's student-focused mission

✓ Increased expenditure on legal counsel

✓ Negative effects on staff morale

✓ Time consumed by fulfilling public records requests

✓ Undermining trust

Many school communication professionals want more training and support to combat false information effectively.

71% | of respondents believe efforts to debunk are effective.

46% | of respondents say they need professional development to gain or strengthen their skills in debunking false information.

? What is your opinion about the possibility of debunking false information?

46% | Efforts to debunk false information are effective with the right approach and strategy, but I need professional development on the skills to do so.

28% | Efforts to debunk false information are minimally effective and have only a minor impact.

25% | Efforts to debunk false information are effective with the right approach and strategy, and I am confident I have the skills do so.

1% | Efforts to debunk false information are entirely ineffective.

1%

25%

28%

46%
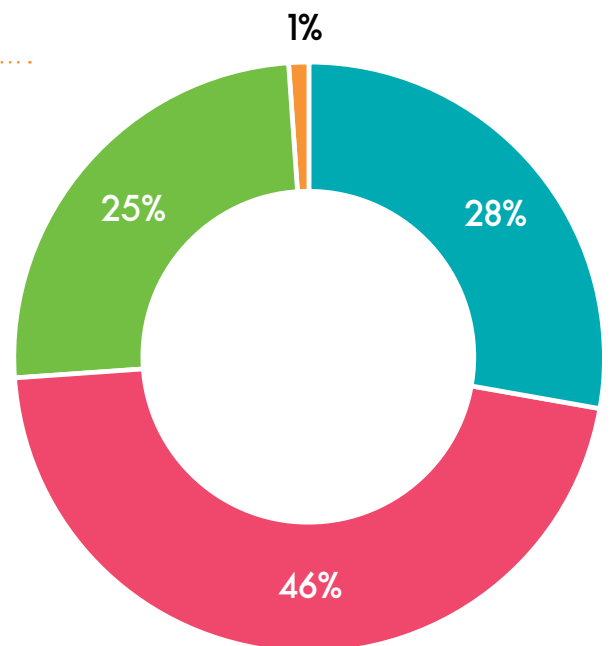
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