



Your eCommunications Partner

April 14, 2008

Dear District/school administrator,

Re: K12 Online Communications Report

The Colorado School Public Relations Association and Relatrix Corporation would like to thank you for participating in this year's 'K12 Online Communications Survey'. Your survey response is helping us build a better understanding of attitudes and usage of the Internet as a communications channel in public education.

As a respondent to the survey, you are receiving this early release of the survey report. This report contains the findings, observations and conclusions, based on our analysis of the survey responses. It also contains an appendix with the response results for each question. This is the second year we executed this survey and the appendix shows the comparison between responses in the 2006 and the 2007 survey.

We hope you find this report useful as you begin planning for the next school year. If you have any questions about how to use this information to improve your communications plan, or how to use the Internet as a more effective communications channel, please contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Jessica Kinghorn'.

Jessica Kinghorn  
Past-President 2006/07  
Colorado School Public Relations Association

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Mark Franke'.

Mark Franke  
President  
Relatrix Corporation

# K12 Online Communications Report

April 2008

Co-Sponsored by:



Your eCommunications Partner

## **Background**

In December 2006 the Colorado School Public Relations Association, in partnership with Relatrix Corporation sponsored an online survey to public school districts across the country. The survey covered questions about the online communication practices and perceptions within public school districts. This online survey was repeated in December 2007 to continue this primary research project and identify changes in use of the Internet as a communications channel within K12 education.

While much coverage has given to the benefits of Internet use in the classroom for instructional purposes, this survey focused on non-instructional use of the Internet, with an emphasis on district level use. There is a limited amount of research in this area, and yet there are several important drivers pushing districts to increase their use of the Internet for parent and community engagement.

Demographic trends display an increase in single-parent and two-income households, making accessibility to parents during the school day a challenge. There is also a continuing growth in use of the Internet by parents, community members and other stakeholders outside of the public education forum. These factors, combined with other demographic and technological trends make it critical to effectively utilize the Internet for communications.

As our research and experience uncover new and interesting technology we will update future surveys to incorporate questions in areas such as mobile technology and Web 2.0. In this way we hope to keep this research meaningful and useful to communication professionals in the K12 educational market in the years ahead. Input and ideas on new areas to incorporate in to this research project are always appreciated and should be directed to one of the sponsoring organizations.

### Survey Methodology

The K12 Online Communications survey was executed using the Relatrix EZCommunicator system. This Online Contact Center solution includes a web-survey module. The sample population was drawn from COSPRA's and Relatrix' members and contact list, respectively. In 2007, the COSPRA executive committee also contacted other state chapter executives to ask them to encourage participation within their membership ranks.

The sample population for the survey was almost the same in 2007 as 2006 with 112 and 115 respondents, respectively. However, the number of states from which responses were received increased from twenty-six to twenty-nine, plus

one Canadian province in 2007. We want to extend our thanks to the chapter president's in other states for their help in broadening of the response base.

### Survey Objectives

The survey objectives for 2007 were similar to 2006 - to gather data on current practices and opinions about the Internet as a communications channel at public school districts, outside of the classroom environment. There was an additional objective in 2007 of identifying any significant changes in response to questions in the different sections of the survey.

The survey contained 60 questions and was again divided into six sections. These included –

- 1 – Respondent Details
- 2 – School District Background
- 3 – Online Communication Priorities & Objectives
- 4 – Personnel & Organizational Structure
- 5 – Policies & Procedures
- 6 – Systems & Technology

From this survey we have increased our understanding of how school district public relations staff and the K12 marketplace apply Internet technology to their communications and community relations functions. We also believe this research can help public school districts improve their application of online communication technology and practices, by providing comparative data on how their peers operate.

## **Survey Findings – Respondent Details & School District Background**

From December 2006 to 2007 the makeup of the survey respondents shifted toward professional communicators. In 2007 80.4% of respondents identified their job position as Communications Director. This was an increase of 20.9% over 2006.

Of those who responded to the Student enrollment question thirty-percent (29.9%) had an enrollment of 5,000 or fewer students while fifty-six percent (56.2%) had fewer than 10,000 students. This represented a slight decrease (5.0%) in the number of smaller districts responding to the survey. While the total number of respondents remained steady, the number of states from which responses were received increased by ten-percent.

There was a small increase from 70% to 76% of districts reporting that fewer than one-half of their student population were enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch program. Over three-quarters (77.5%) of respondents indicated that the majority (over 50%) of their community had Internet Access. When describing the volume of e-mails they handled, there was a slight increase from ninety-one (91.37%) to ninety-five (94.6%) who said they received over one-hundred e-mails at their district offices each week, excluding spam.

## **Survey Findings – Online Communication Priorities & Objectives**

When rating their use of the Internet to meet various communication objectives, the most noticeable change occurred in the area of communicating district successes to parents and the community. On this objective 70.6% of districts indicated extensive use of the Internet. This was up from 53.0% in 2006. The second biggest change occurred in connecting with a key communicator network. There was a 10.5% increase to almost one-half of districts using the Internet for this purpose. Community Alerts also showed an increase of seven percent (7.0%), while Parent/Teacher interaction remained at about the same level for both years.

Districts that had a written communication plan remained fairly flat with just over two-thirds (67.6%) having one. On the other hand there was a small increase in the percentage of respondents with an online section in their plan. When measuring communication plan effectiveness quantitative feedback methods showed a decline, while qualitative feedback showed a slight increase.

There was a noticeable shift away from one-to-one encounters for gathering community input, which showed approximately an eight-percent decline. Online feedback methods, such as website forms, email and surveys each showed a marked increase, with survey use, in particular jumping by 13.7%.

When finishing the phrase, "My school board/trustees consider online communications to be..." there was a shift toward online communication being perceived as a higher priority than other channels, with an increase from 14.8% to 23.6% of respondents. When completing the phrase, "In our district online communications is..." there was a slight shift toward the perception that districts are using the Internet to meet their needs or differentiate from other districts.

### **Survey Findings – Personnel & Organizational Structure**

There was an increase from 83.5% to 95.5% of districts stating they had a dedicated communications director or public information officer. Conversely, there was a slight decrease, from 89.8% to 82.2% of those districts with dedicated communications directors who reported directly to the district superintendent.

All respondents had a district web site. While the portion who indicated their website was managed by multiple people in different departments remained close to one-half, there was also a slight shift away from part-time to full-time webmasters being in charge of the district website. There was a noticeable eighteen-percent increase in portion of webmasters reporting to the communications director rather than the technology director or other district administrators.

Districts with school websites remained close to ninety percent in 2007. Of those that did have campus web sites there was a decrease in management by the district webmaster and a subsequent increase in management by part-time webmasters, which comprised 56.7% of survey respondents.

### **Survey Findings – Policies & Procedures**

There was a very slight increase to 80.0% in the portion of respondents that applied some level of standards for content and layout on school and department web sites. There was also a small increase to 70.6% in the portion saying that they track website activity.

On the question of who receives e-mails submitted through the web site there was a slight decrease from various departments or groups outside of communications, which collectively went from 58.2% to 50.4%. This decrease was offset by an increase in email being received by communications staff, which went from 41.7% to 47.7%.

There was a significant increase of almost twenty-percent in the percentage of districts that track responses to incoming mail. This jumped from 27.8% to

47.3%. However, there was an unusually high percentage (10.9%) of respondents who didn't know whether their district tracked responses to incoming email. There was an even bigger jump of over thirty-percent in the portion of districts providing online feedback forms on their website. This increased from 34.2% in 2006 to 67.6% in 2007.

## **Survey Findings – Systems & Technology**

While two-thirds of districts continue to host their own district website in 2007, there was a small increase of approximately five-percent in the use external website hosting services. There was a similar percentage change for school website hosting, where external hosting increased by almost five-percent.

There was a noticeable increase of over ten-percent to 76.4% in districts using an online student information system. There was also a small increase in the number of district using the Internet for Parent Notification, which went from 51.3% in 2006 to 54.5% in 2007. The number of districts using content management systems increased, with 46.8% indicating they used such a system for managing their district website. There was a similar increase in the portion of districts using content management systems for their school websites, although there were almost fifteen-percent of respondents who did not know the answer to this question.

The most widely implemented online communications function remained 'Staff web mail access with more than ninety-percent (93.7%) of districts responding that they implemented this feature one year or more ago. This was a very slight increase over 2006. The next most widely implemented functions were again downloadable forms at 85.3%; event calendars at over seventy-five percent and secure staff portals with 70.0% of districts having already implemented these capabilities.

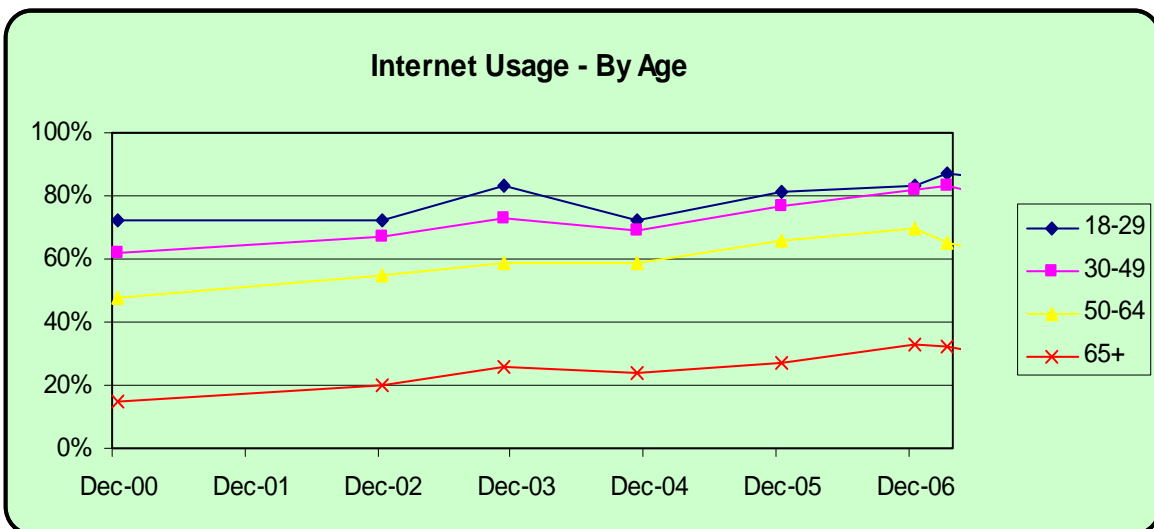
The least widely implemented function was community discussion forums with only 4.5% of districts having implemented this technology. This was followed by Web logs (Blogs) and Podcasts, with only 13.9% and 14.5%, respectively, having implemented these online communication capabilities. It is interesting to note that in the case of both Blogs and Podcasts there was a strong growth in utilization from a more modest percentage in 2006 of 8.8% and 9.7%, respectively.

## Observations –

### The Internet continues to grow in priority as a communications channel

Question 30 showed an increased prioritization of Online Communications by school boards. Approximately ten-percent more respondents in 2007 stated that their board placed a higher priority on online communications compared to other channels. There was also an interesting increase in districts that in 2007 have an online communication section within their written communication plan and districts that consider the Internet as a way to differentiate their district from others.

This increase in public school priority reflects a continuing trend in Internet utilization by district stakeholders. The following table shows the results of a Pew Trusts – Internet and Lifestyle study regarding Internet access and usage across different age groups in the United States. From this chart there's a clear growth in age groups that represent recent public school graduates, new parents and parents of current school age children.



### Outbound communication remains the primary application of the Internet, but there is an increasing utilization for gathering community input

With recent high-profile incidents of violence on campuses, it is not surprising to observe an increased priority in parent and community alerts. Question 20 showed an increase to fully one-half of respondents who said their district made extensive use of the Internet for this purpose. There was also a slight increase to 54.5% of districts using a Parent Notification System.

Aside from emergency or mass notification there was also a noticeable increase in use of the Internet for communicating district successes, which in 2007 was used by more than seventy-percent of districts. There was also more than a ten-percent increase in use of the Internet for reaching out to Key Communicator Networks.

However, aside from indicators of outbound communication, there was an important increase in districts using the Internet to gather community feedback. Question 26 showed a significant increase to 79.8% of districts using online surveys to gather community input. There was an increase in the use of website forms and email for this purpose.

*There is an increased use of online methods for data gathering and tracking*

Question 39 shows an increase to 70.6% of districts that track and review website activity. Question 41 shows a dramatic increase of twenty-percent from 2006 to 2007 in the portion of districts that track responses to incoming email, and Question 42 shows an even greater increase of 33.4% in districts using online feedback forms.

Taken together these questions indicate that responding districts are relying more on online methods to gather data about website and email activity and to track usage of online services.

*Responsibility for Web site management is moving toward communications*

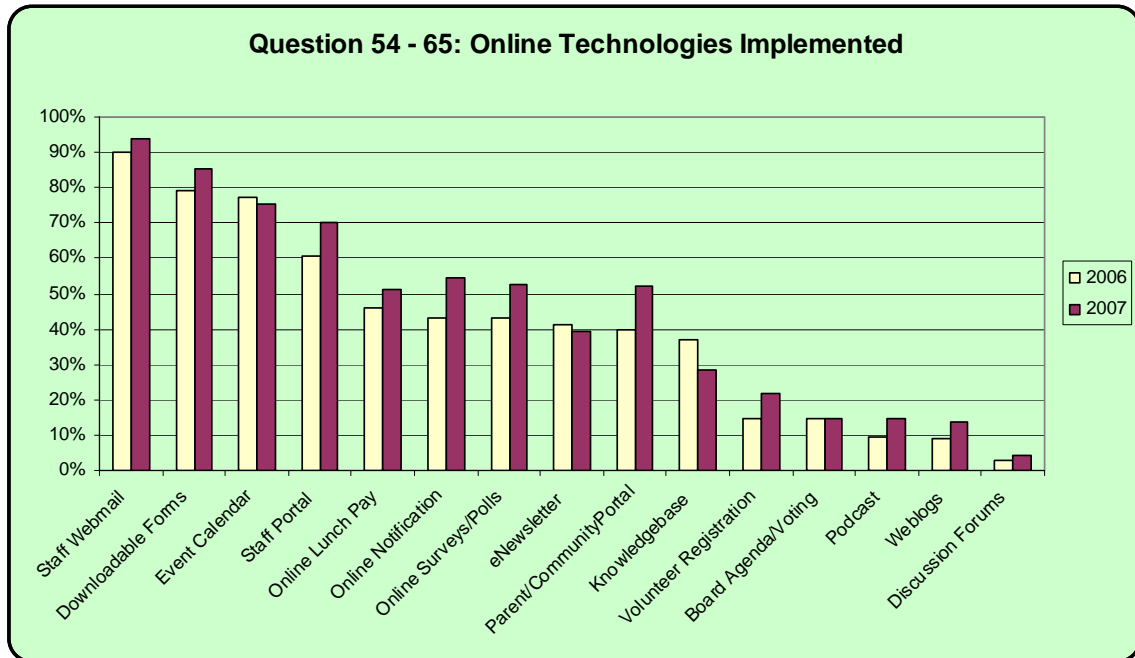
Question 34 shows a significant shift in reporting responsibility for the district website. From 2006 to 2007 eighteen-percent more district webmasters were reporting to the communications department, as opposed to the technology or other departments in the central office. While less dramatic there was also a slight move toward external hosting of district websites, as shown in Question 44.

These two facts seem to indicate that more districts perceive their website as an important platform for communications. Furthermore, as the responsibility for hosting district websites is moved outside the district's firewall the IT department is relinquishing responsibility for web managers and instead focusing on other technology initiatives with their available resources.

*Community-oriented technologies are growing, but are still used only by a small percentage of districts*

Questions 61, 64, and 65 again indicate that in 2007 there is still limited adoption of Podcasts, Blogs, and Community forums as online communications functions

in K12 education. As the chart below shows, they still rank at the bottom of the list of technologies adopted by school districts. However, it is interesting to note that in the case of both podcasts and weblogs there was a strong relative increase from 2006 to 2007 in districts implementing these technologies. There was also a noticeable decline in the number of districts that said they had No Plans to implement these technologies in the future.



These technologies, along with Wiki's and RSS – which were not included in these survey questions, are examples of Web 2.0 technologies. Some of these technologies, such as Web logs and Wiki's represent a more community-driven model of communications. From anecdotal evidence there still appears to be uncertainty in many districts about how best to incorporate these technologies in to the general communications strategy.

## Conclusion

The 2007 survey results showed a steady overall growth in use of the Internet for communications and community engagement. Online communication was used by an increasing portion of survey respondents to meet their communication objectives, and there was an across the board increase in deployment of various systems and technologies for online communication.

There also seems to be an increase in the recognition of the Internet as an important channel of communications by school boards. This raises the prospect for both greater resource allocation in district budgets for online communications, and a broadening of methods in which online communication techniques are applied. There was also a shift in districts that perceived online communication as meeting their needs or differentiating themselves from others.

One of the most dramatic shifts appeared to be in the area of personnel. Responses showed a major shift in webmaster reporting toward the communications office and away from technology or other district departments. Additionally, there was a slight increase in full-time webmasters managing the district website. There was also a shift away from district or volunteer webmasters managing school websites to part-time or full-time webmasters being responsible for this job. This is a further indication that websites and communication services offered through school and district websites are taking on greater perceived importance by administrators.

There was also a noticeable increase in the use of quantitative data, such as website statistics, online surveys and tracking of responses to incoming email. Data analysis must become an increasingly important area of attention as the volume of incoming email showed an overall increase for 2006 to 2007, as well as the obvious increase in website activity.

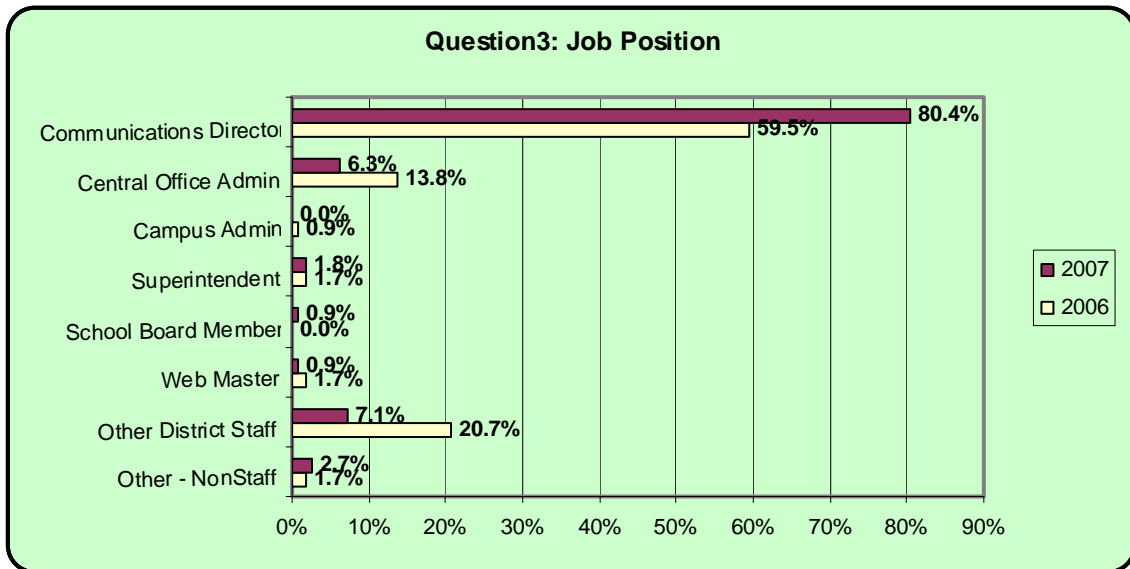
Additionally, as more emphasis is placed on online communications it will become critical to establish metrics by which to measure the effectiveness of this communications channel. Districts use an ever increasing number of systems and technologies to meet their online communication needs. As analysis of the data generated by these different systems and technologies becomes increasingly important, simplifying that process by combining more applications in fewer systems will increase in value.

In the area of technology there was an increase in the use of content management systems to administer district and school websites, which appears to correlate with increases in webmaster responsibility. There was also a significant increase in parent and emergency notification systems and

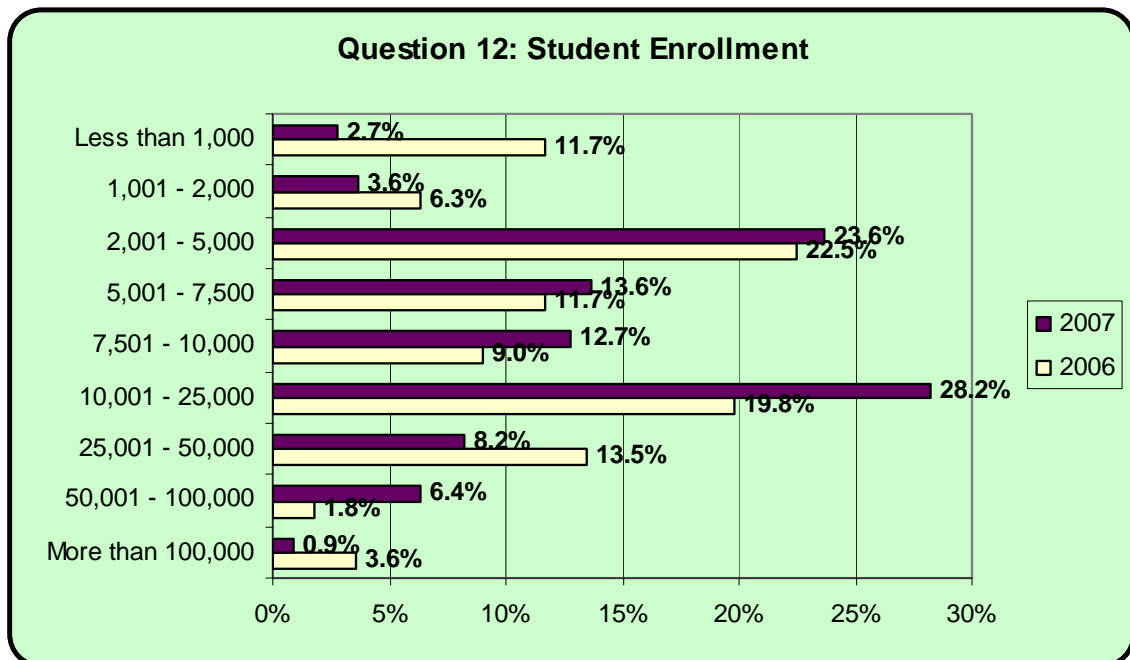
technology. This is not surprising, given the recent increase in high-profile incidents of campus violence at both K12 and post-K12 institutions.

All in all 2007 showed a clear shift toward increased use of the Internet for communications in K12, and its relative priority as a channel. Websites are becoming more of a platform for providing communication services, which means their management must be closely aligned with the communications function. As data gathering increases there will be a growing need for effective analysis of data, across the many different online communication tools being used, and districts will need to develop metrics by which to measure their effective use of the Internet. While Web 2.0 technology usage has still not penetrated deeply into K12 organizations there is a promising growth in their application, and districts will need to begin planning on how best to incorporate these new community-centric tools into their overall communications strategy.

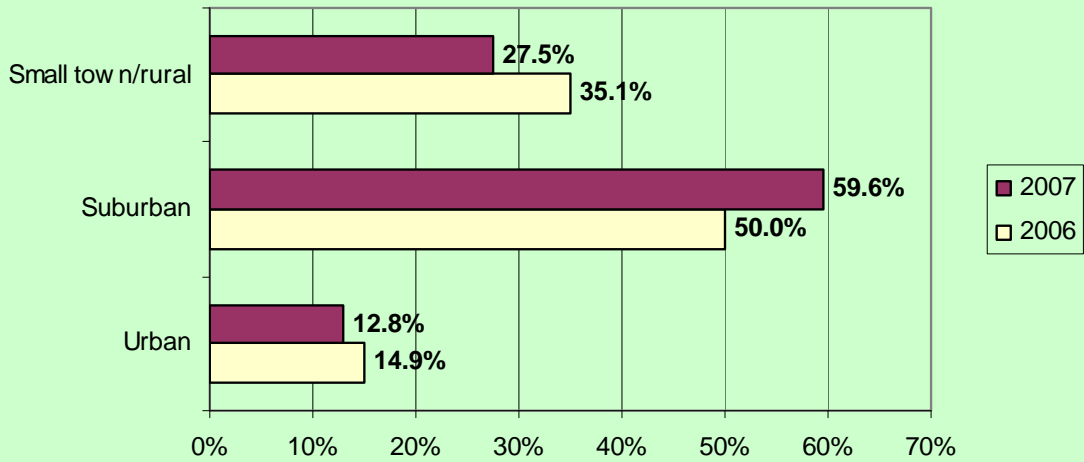
## Appendix A: Survey Results



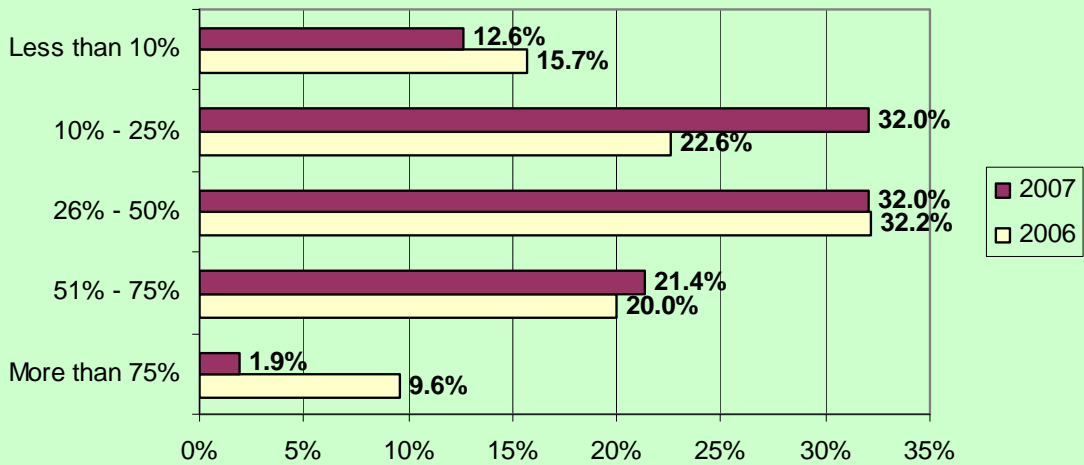
Questions 4 – 11 are details about the survey responder. Not shown here to assure anonymity.



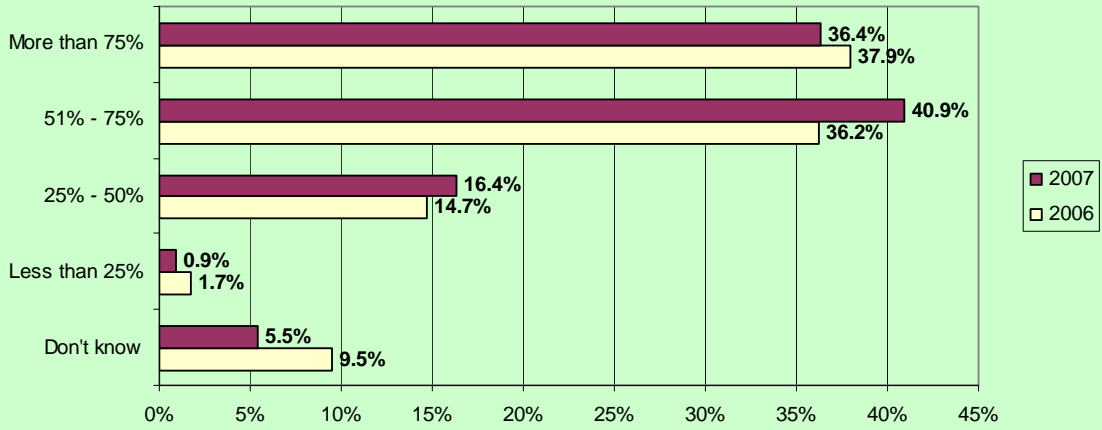
### Question 13: Community Makeup



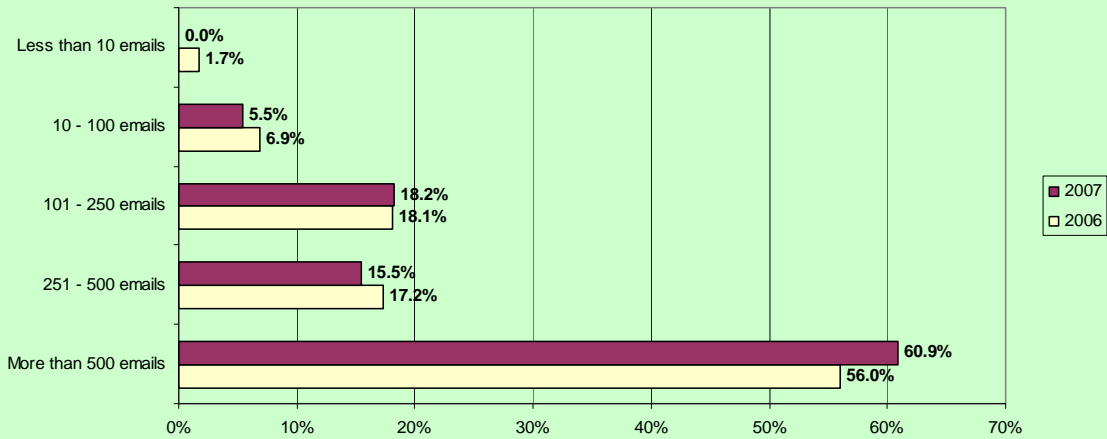
### Question 14: Free & Reduced Lunch



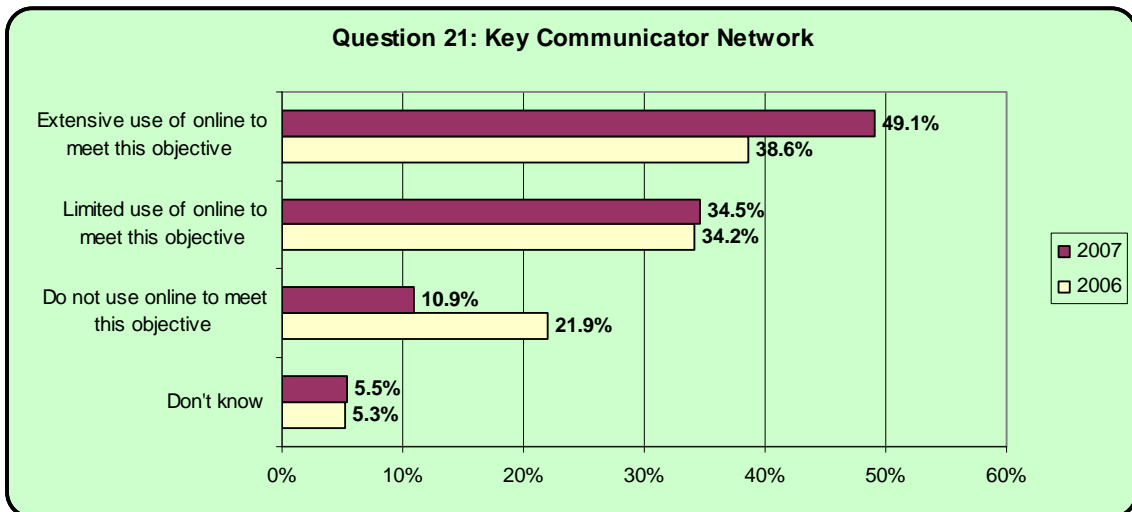
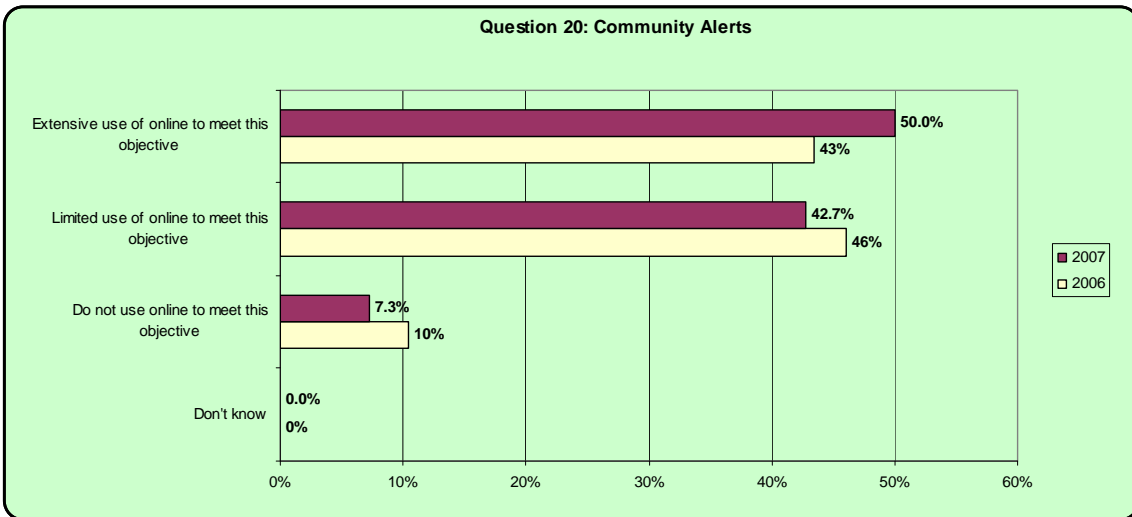
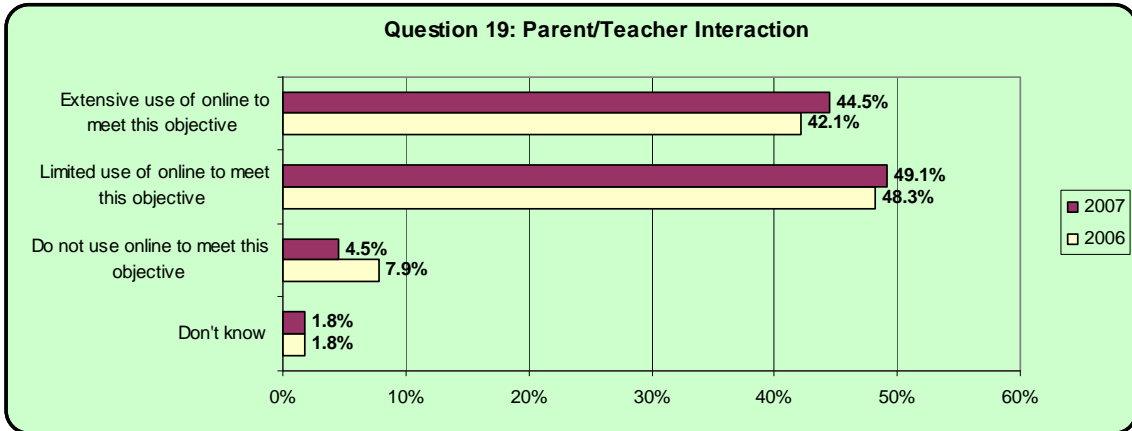
### Question 15: Community Internet Access



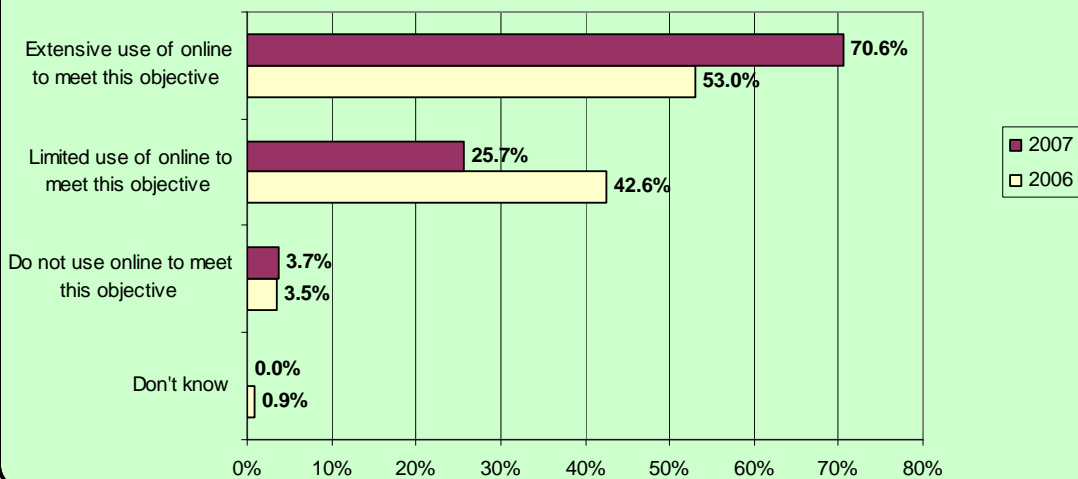
### Question 16: Email Per Week (Excluding Spam)



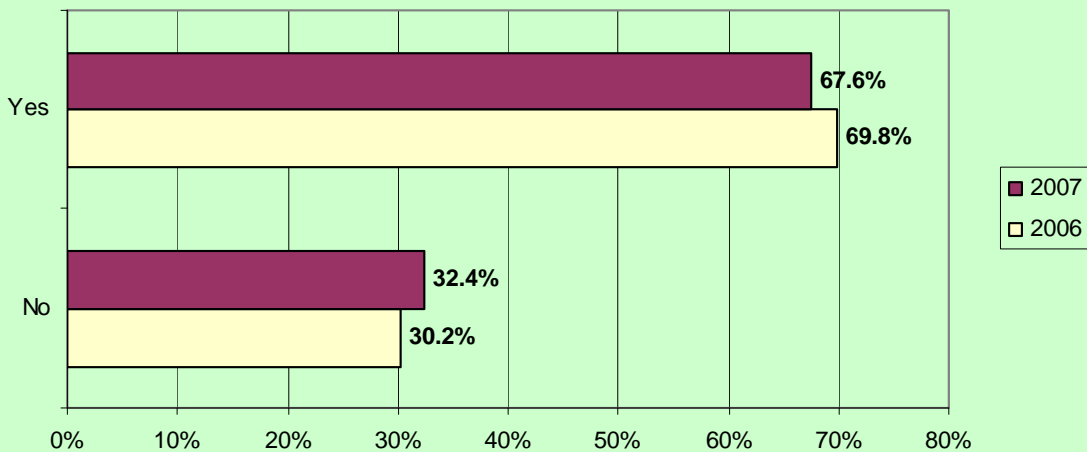
Rate the following five communication objectives at your district.



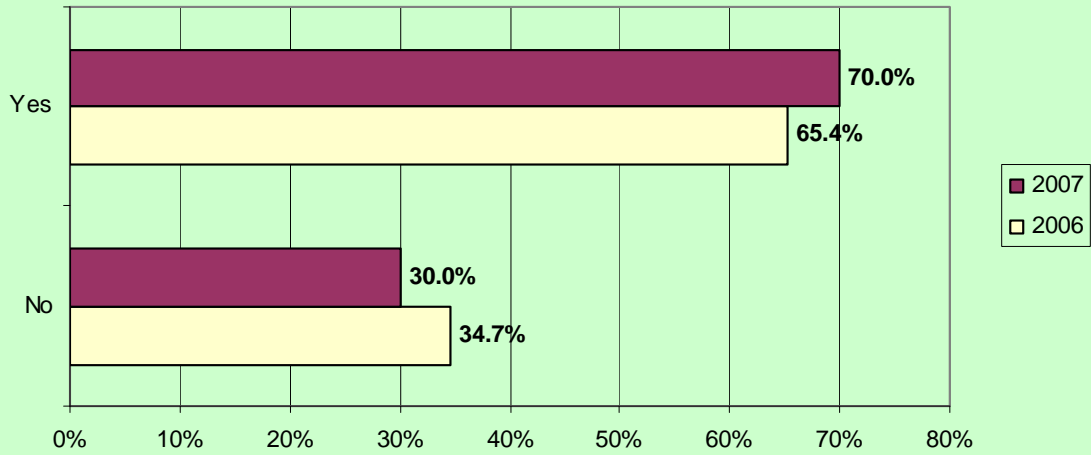
### Question 22: District Successes



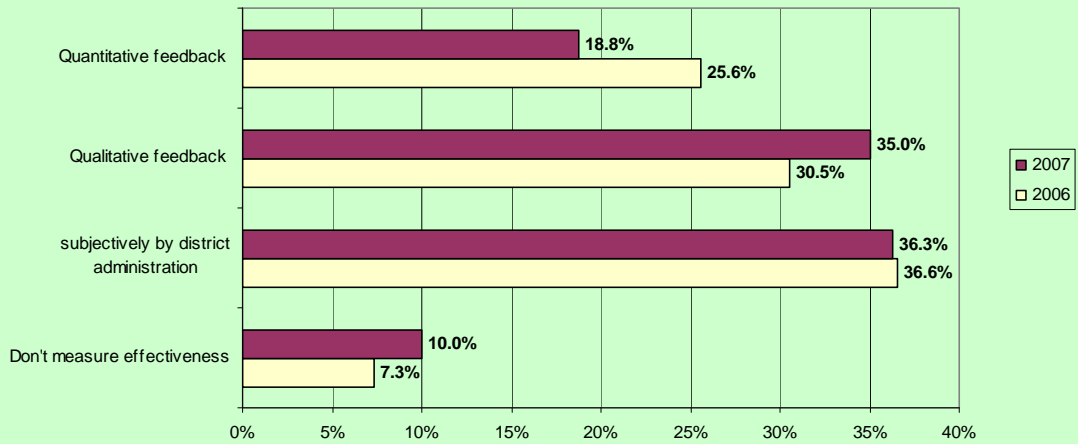
### Question 23: Written Communications Plan

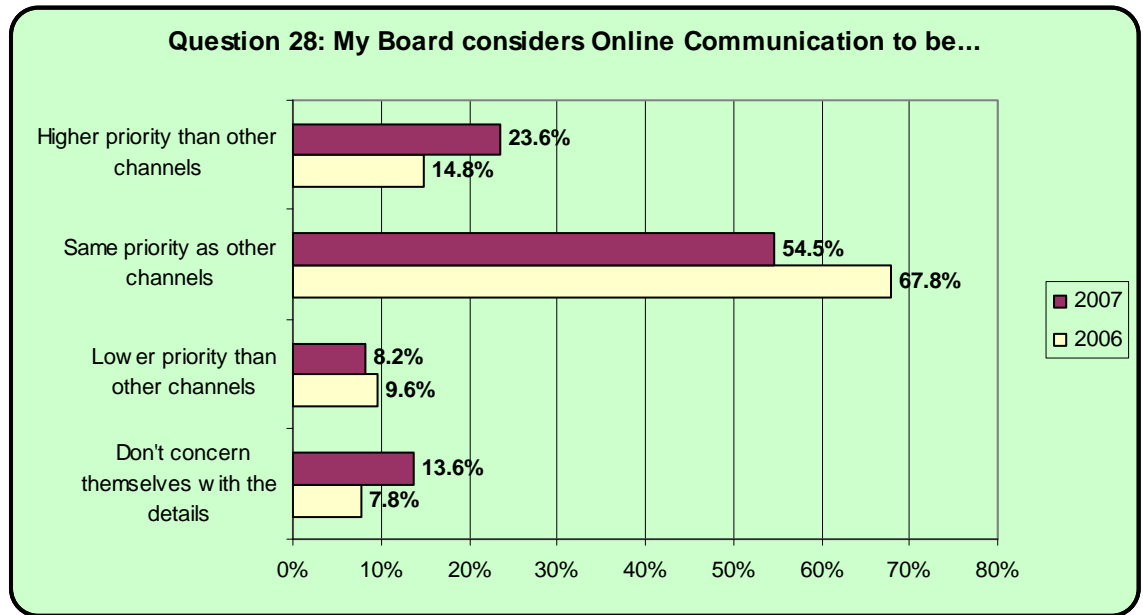
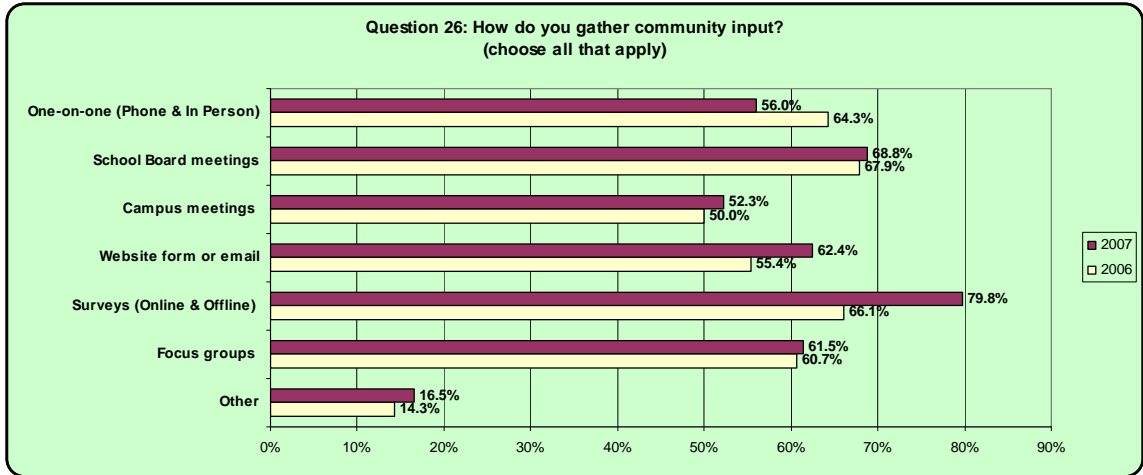


### Question 24: Communications Plan includes Online Section

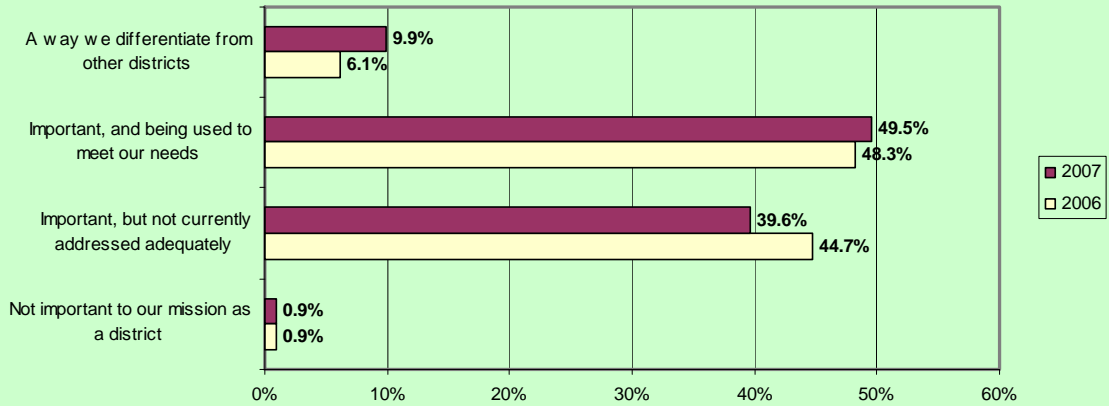


### Question 25: Measuring Plan Effectiveness

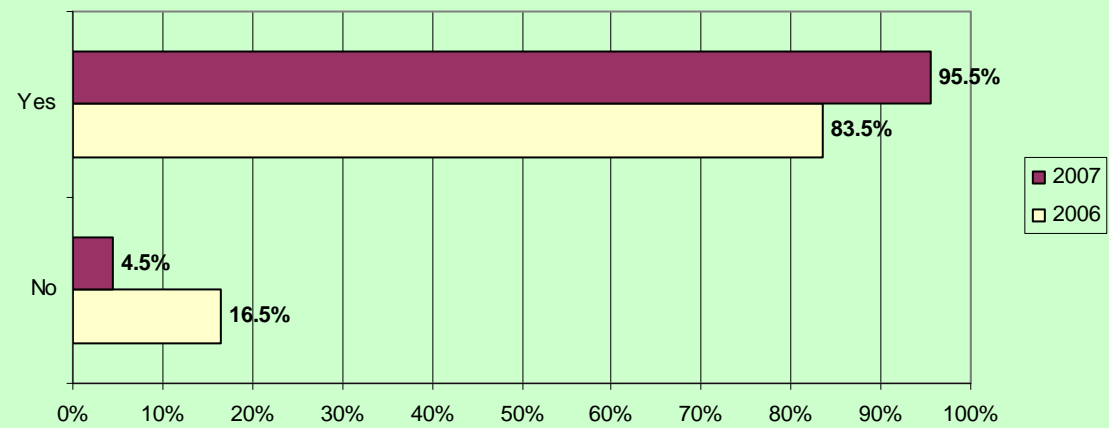




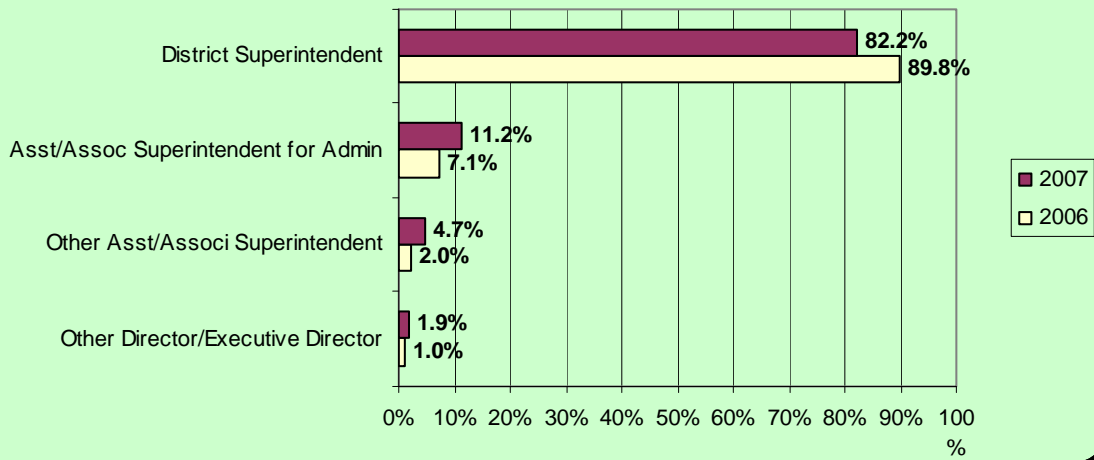
**Question 29: In our district online communications is...**



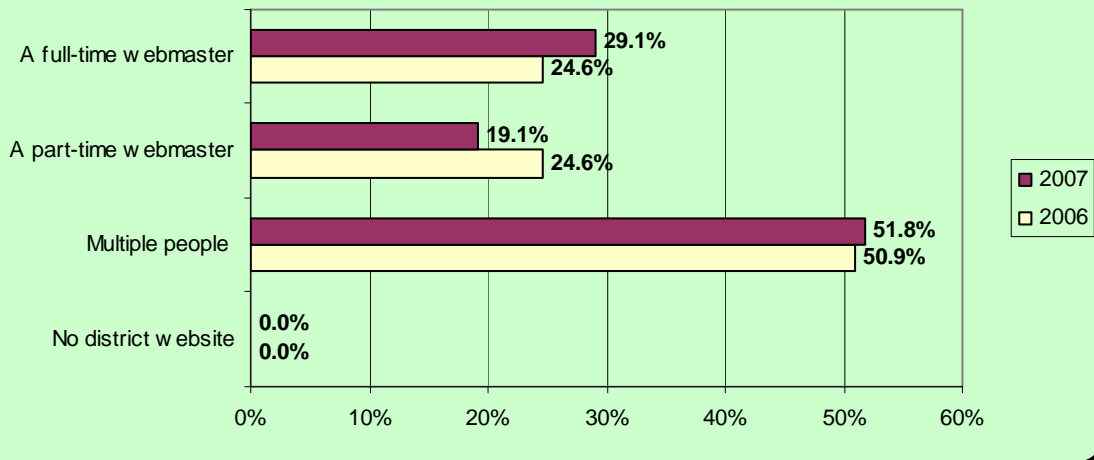
**Question 31: Dedicated Communications Director/PIO**

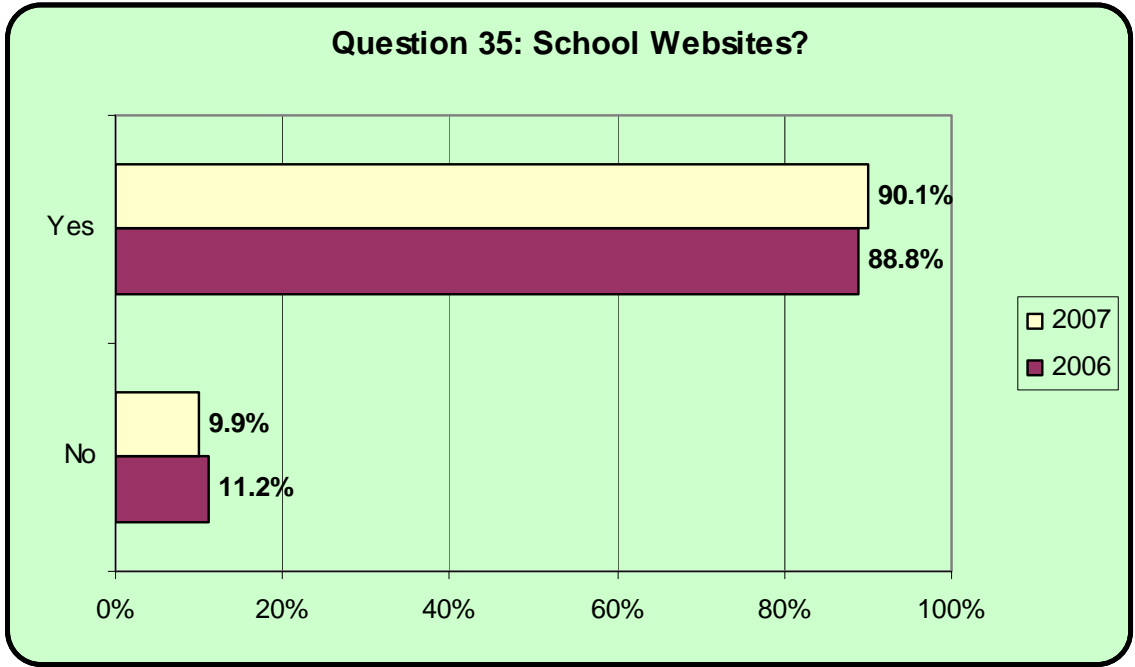
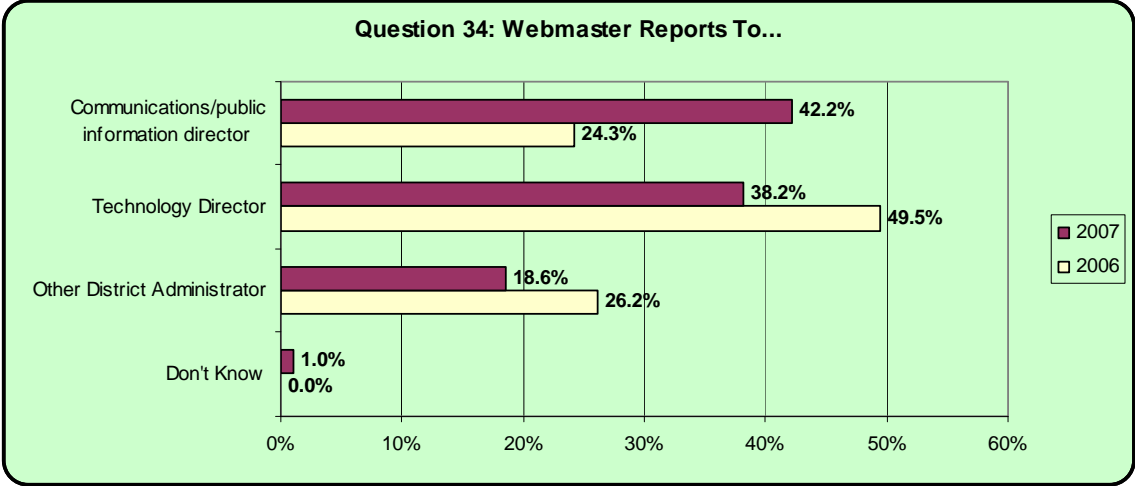


**Question 32: Communication Director/PIO Report To...**

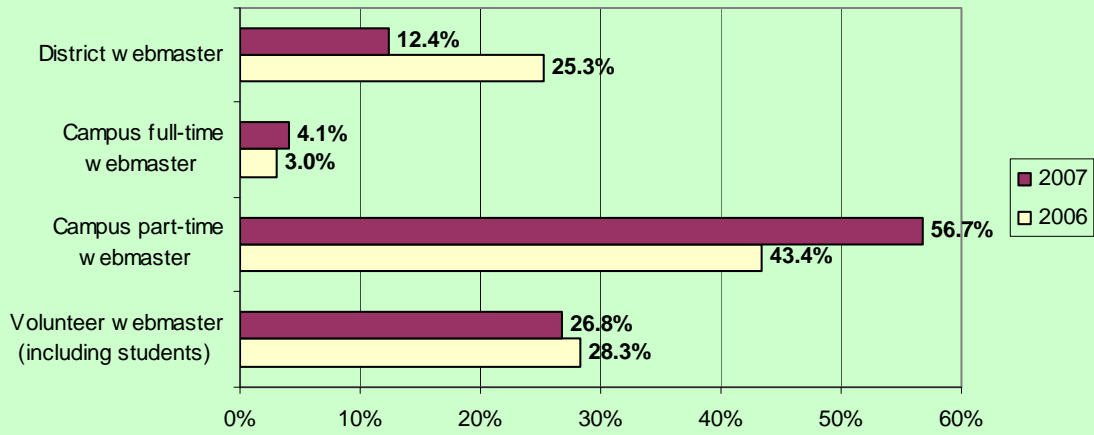


**Question 33: Who manage district website ?**

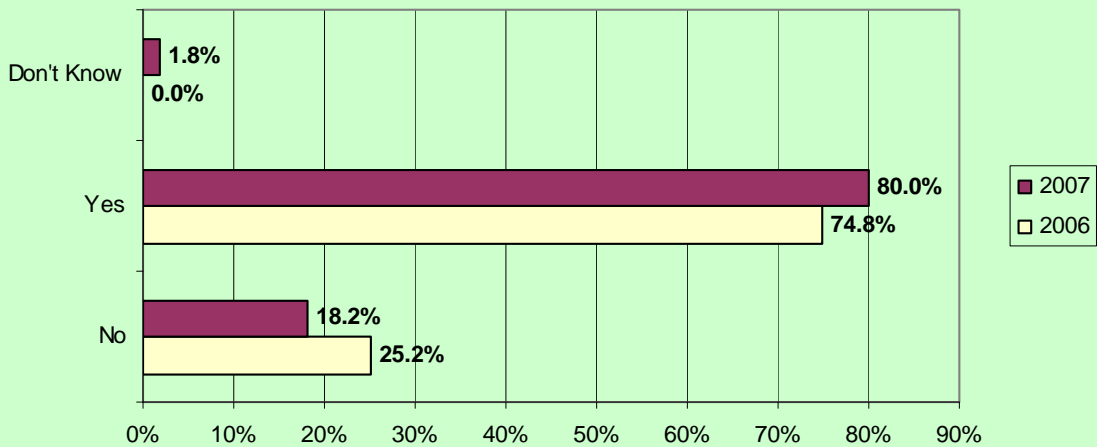




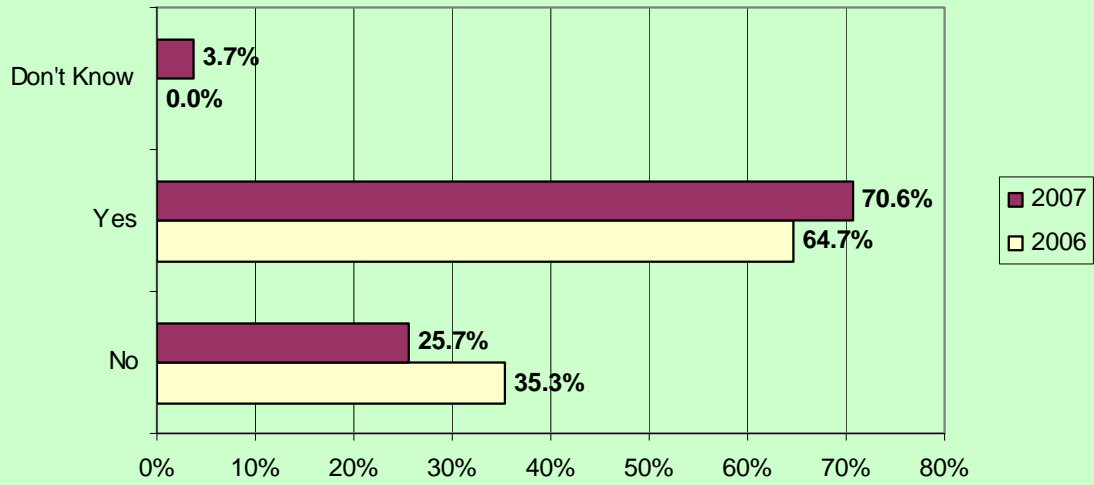
### Question 36: Who Manages School Websites?



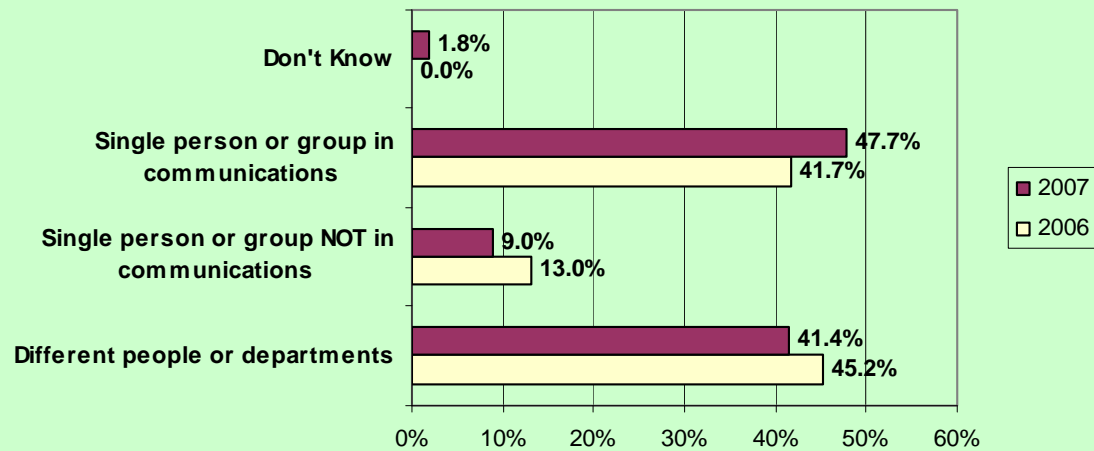
### Question 38: Standards for School or Dept Websites?



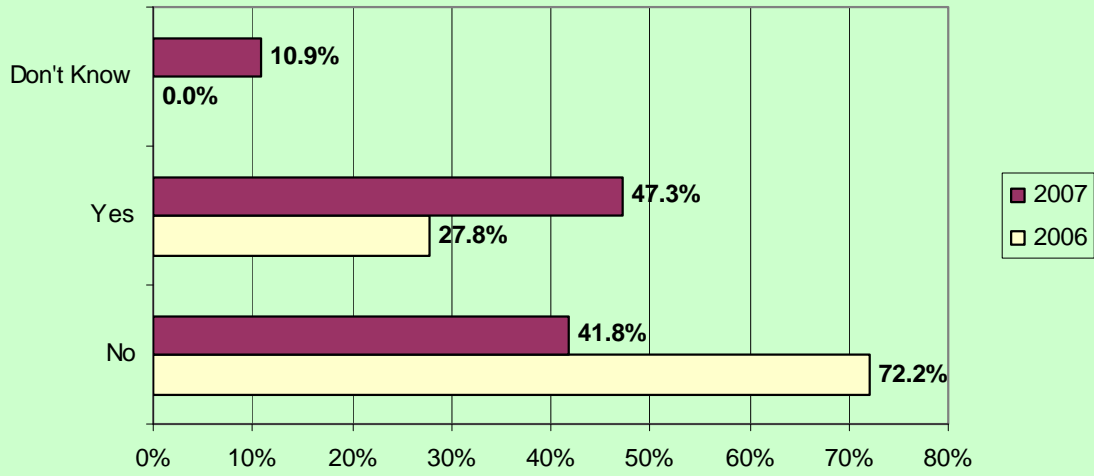
### Question 39: Track/Review Website Activity?



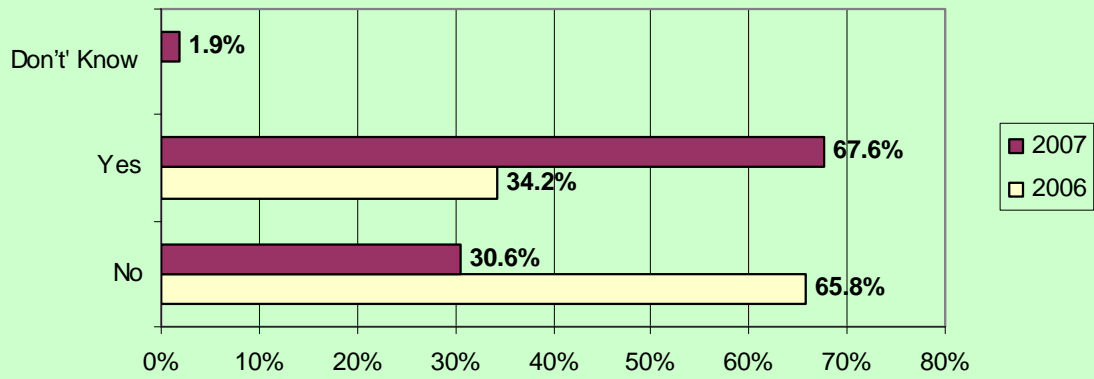
### Question 40: Who receives district email?



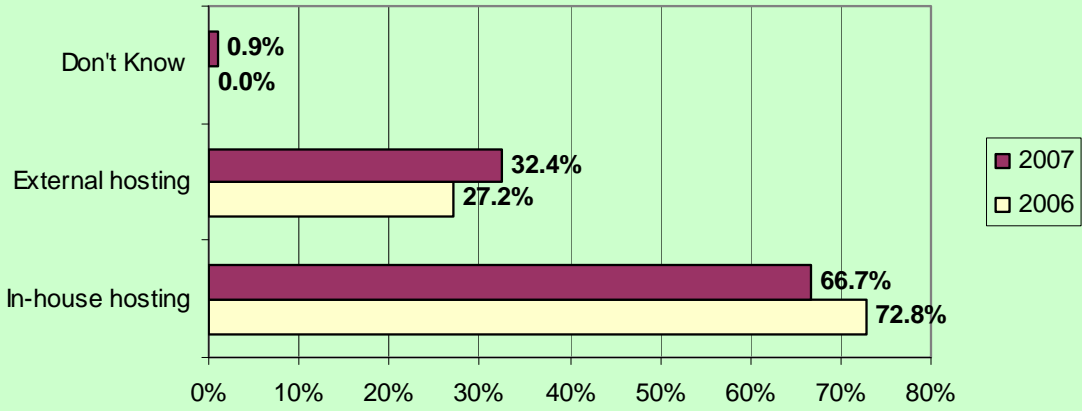
### Question 41: Track Responses to Incoming Email?



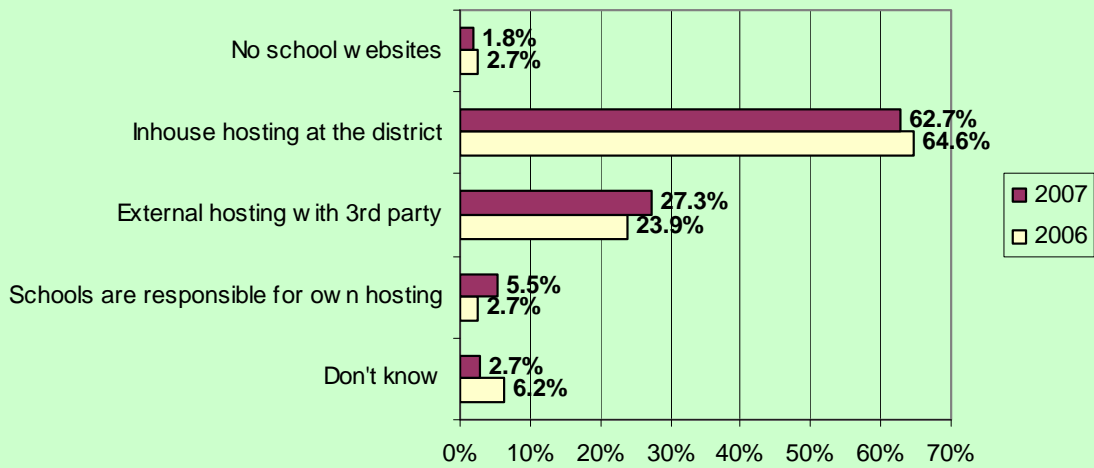
### Question 42: Online feedback forms?



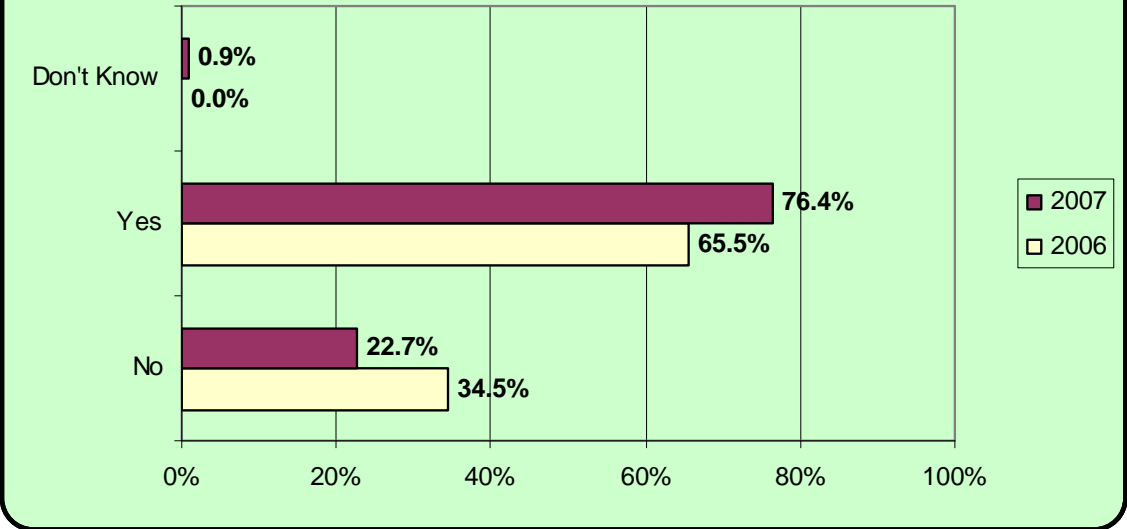
### Question 44: District Website Hosted



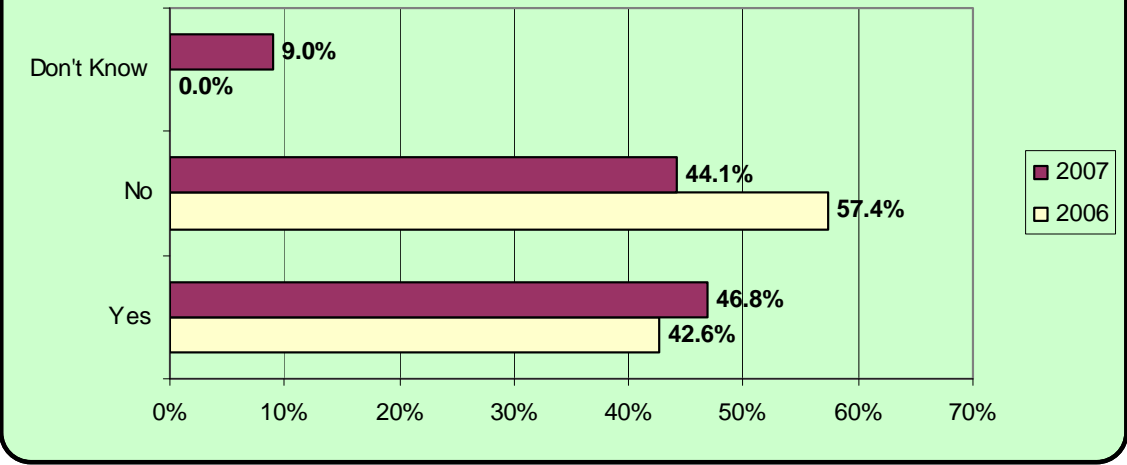
### Question 45: School Websites Hosted



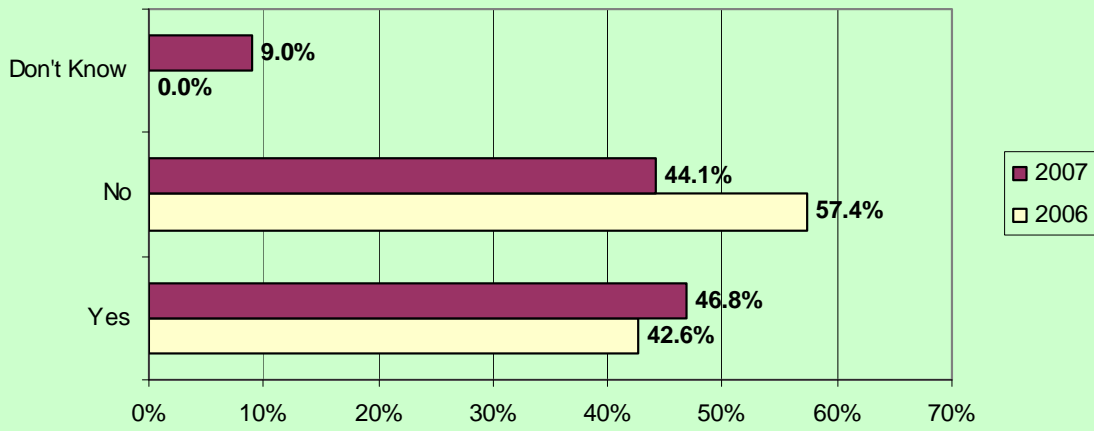
### Question 46: Student Information System



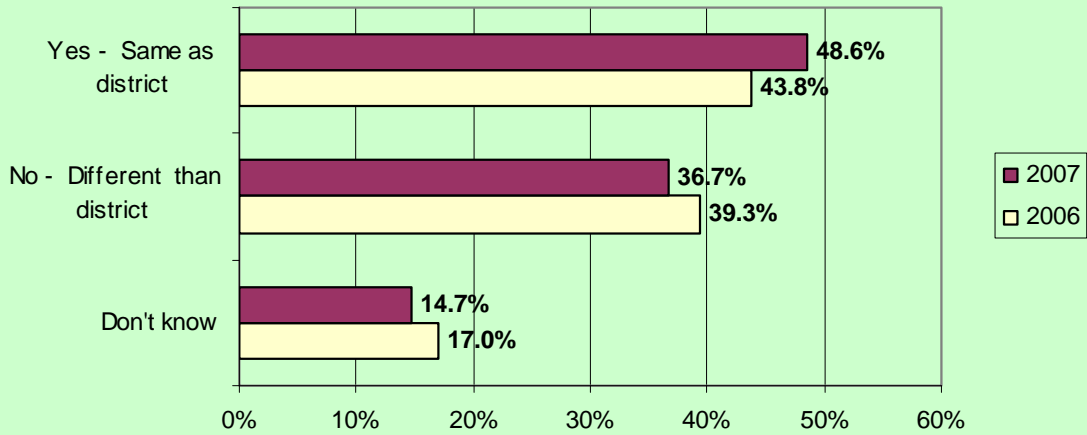
### Question 48: Content Management System District Website



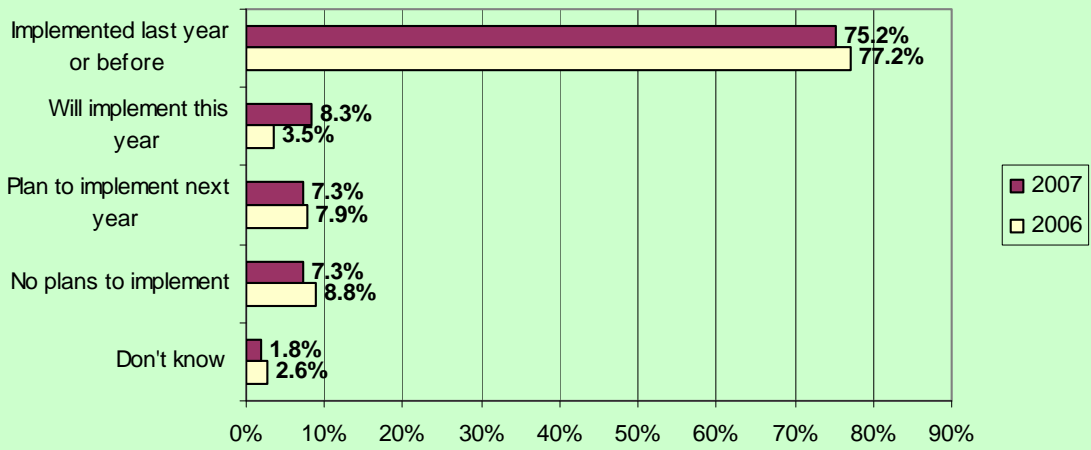
**Question 48: Content Management System  
District Website**



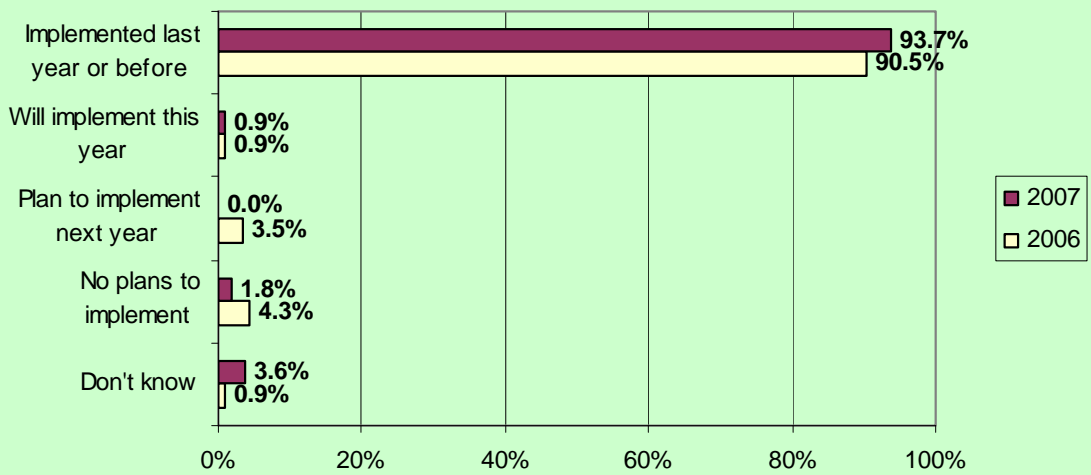
**Question 49: Content Management System  
School Websites**



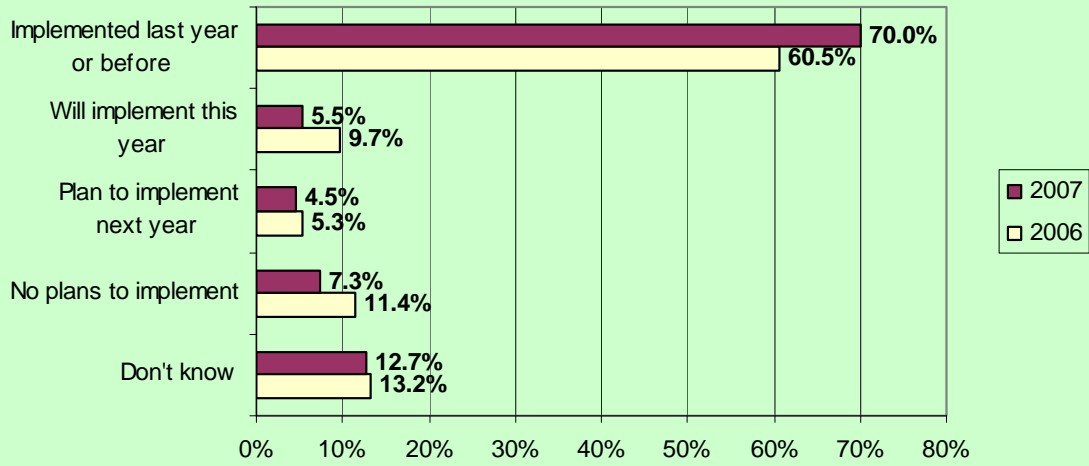
### Question 51: Event Calendar



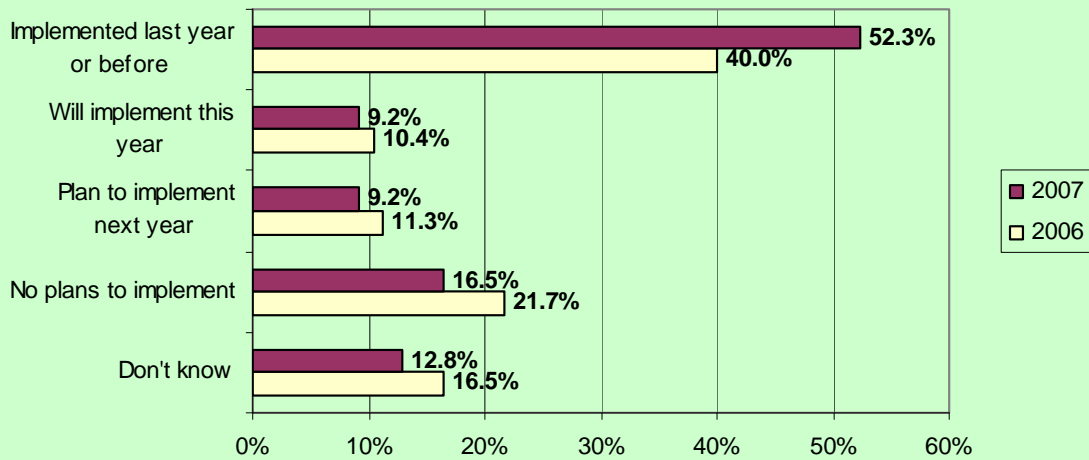
### Question 52: Staff Web Mail



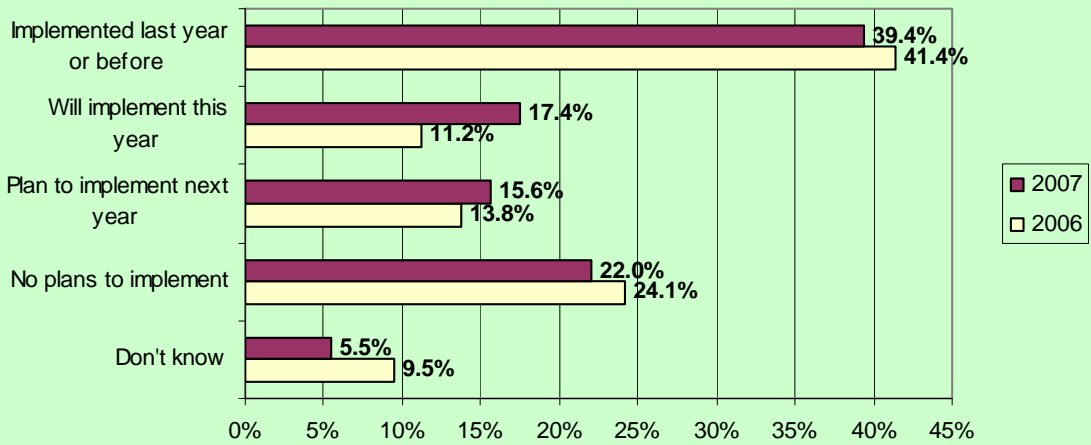
### Question 53: Secure Staff Portal



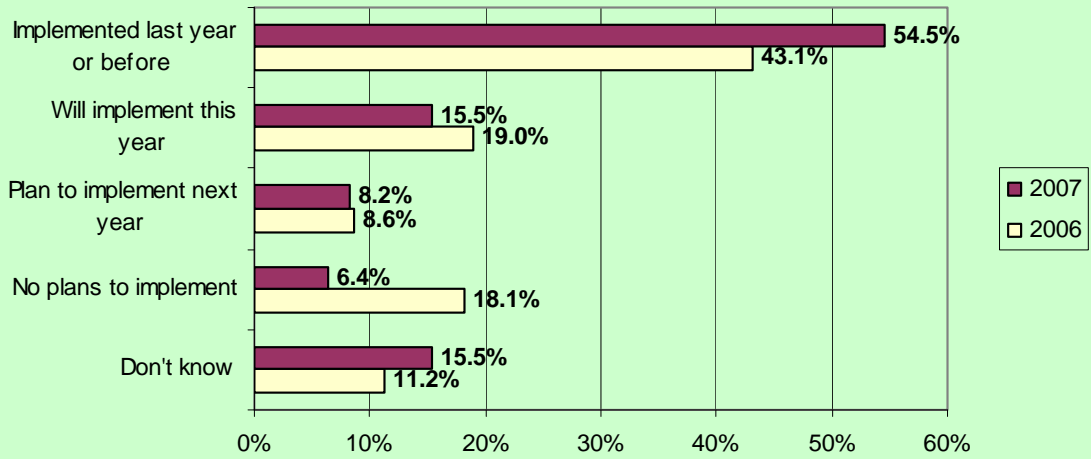
### Question 54: Parent / Community Portal



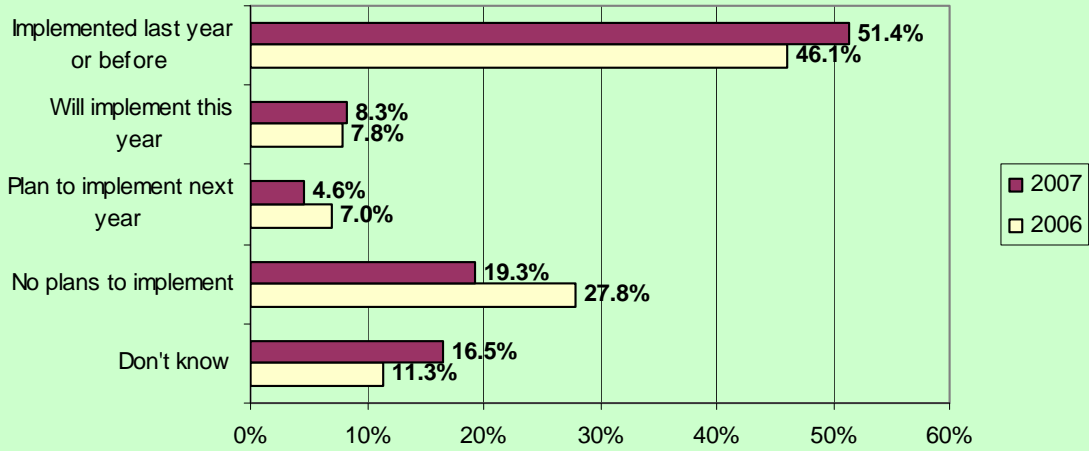
### Question 55: eNewsletter Sign-up & Publication



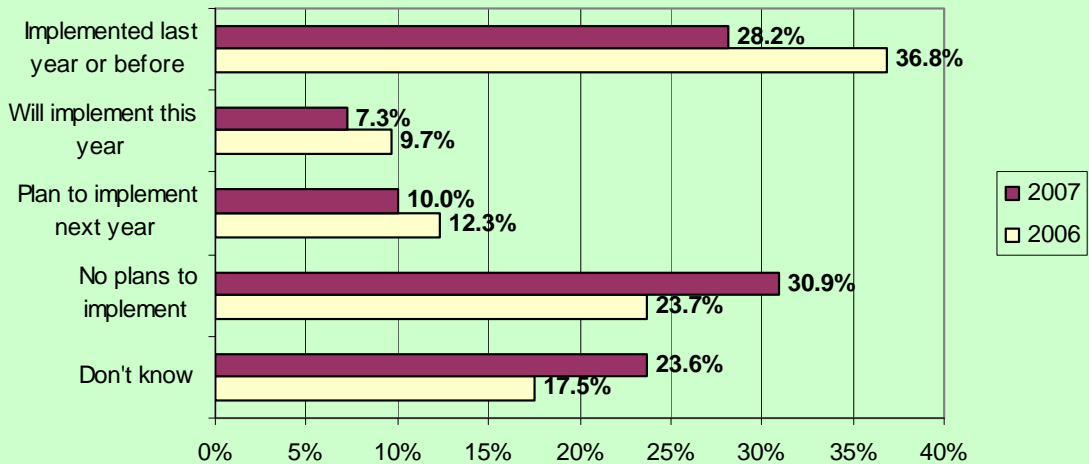
### Question 56: Emergency Notification (Email and/or Phone)



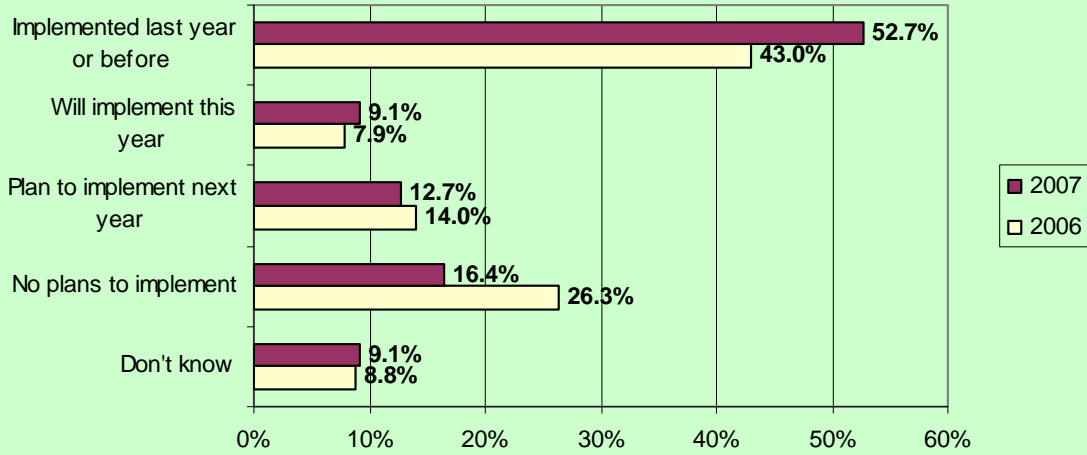
### Question 57: Online Lunch Menu & Prepayment



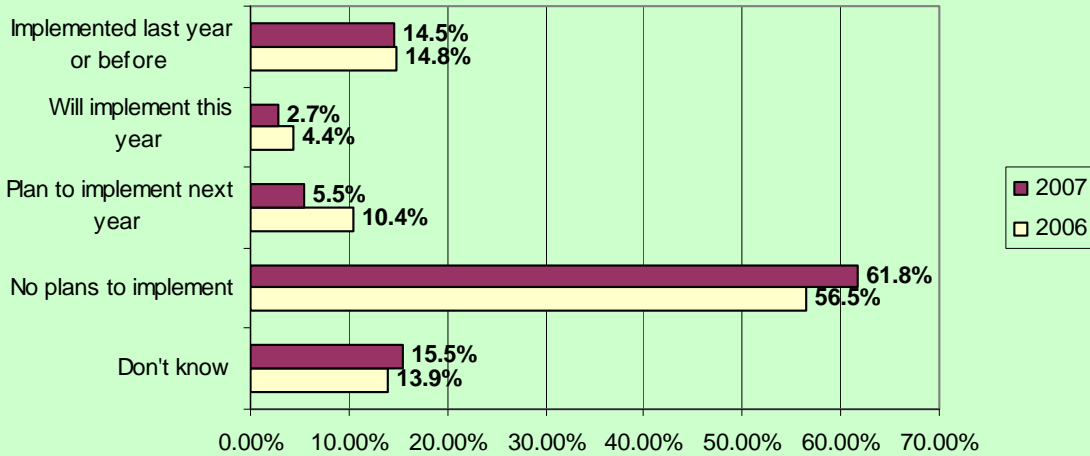
### Question 58: Searchable Knowledgebase



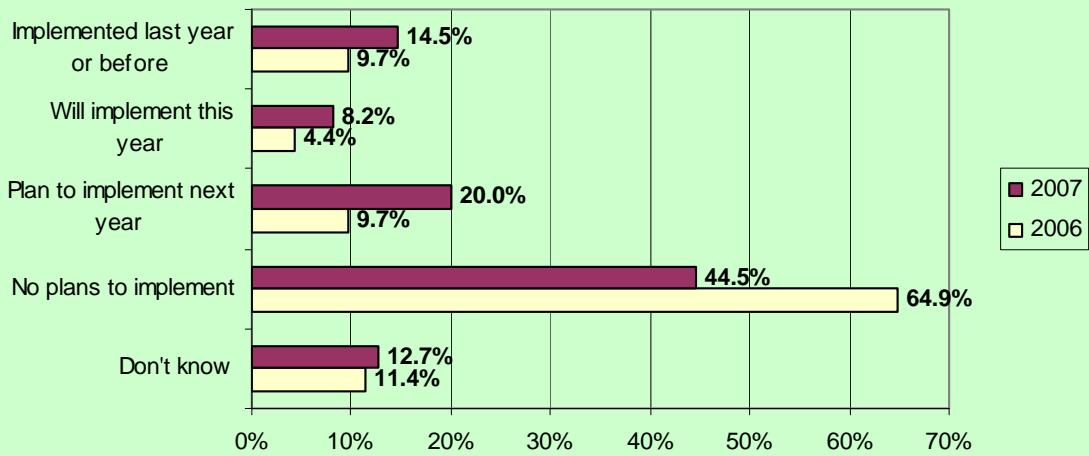
### Question 59: Online Surveys & Polls



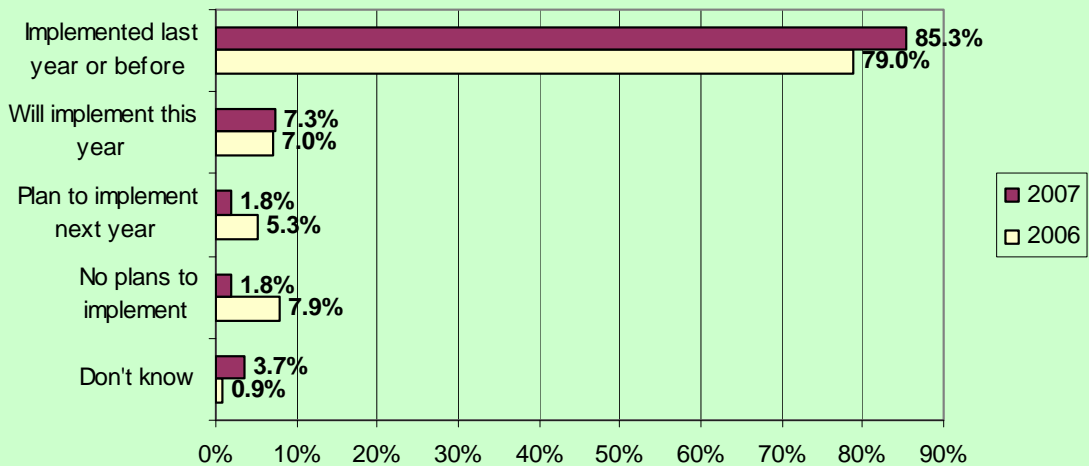
### Question 60: Dynamic Board Agenda & Online Voting



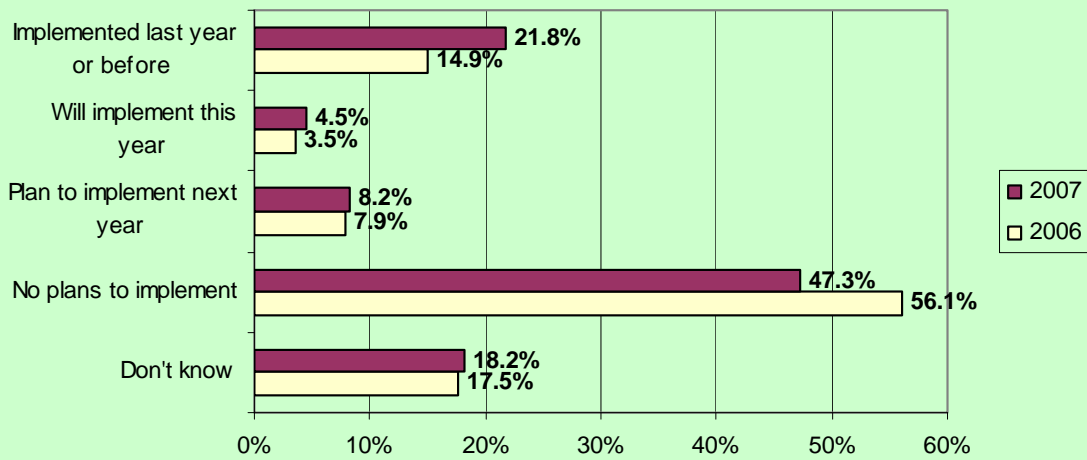
### Question 61: Podcasts (excluding classroom instruction)



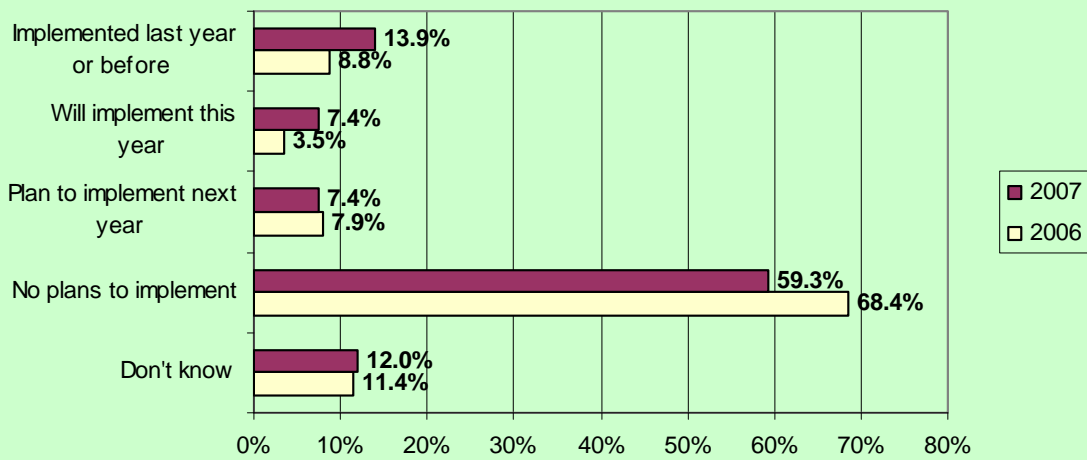
### Question 62: Downloadable Forms/Applications



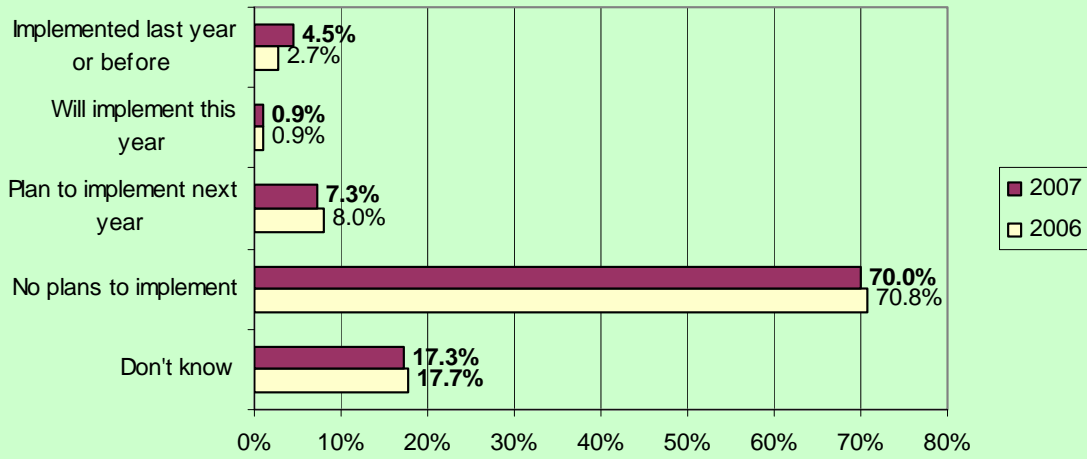
### Question 63: Volunteer Registration & Notification



### Question 64: Web logs (Blogs)



### Question 65: Community Discussion Forums



## **Appendix B: Internet References**

The following are web resources used as reference in preparing and compiling this report –

National Center for Educational Statistics

<http://nces.ed.gov>

Pew Internet and American Life Project

[http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/182/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/182/report_display.asp)

National School Board Association

*Communications Plan:*

<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/tcp.html>

*Strategic Planning & Communications:*

<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/Communicate.html>

National School Public Relations Association

*Communications & Accountability Project:*

<http://www.nspra.org/cap.htm>

US Census Bureau

*America's Family and Living Arrangements:*

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>

Colorado School Public Relations Association

<http://www.cospra.org>

Relatrix Corporation

<http://www.relatrix.com>