



# STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF K-12 EDUCATION

Prepared for Washington Association of School Administrators

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# INTRODUCTION

The state of Washington conducts an annual survey, the Cross Cut Elway Poll, that, in part, studies public perceptions on which public services it should prioritize funding.<sup>1</sup> Although previous editions of the survey have ranked education as the first or second priority for voters, in more recent editions education has ranked below issues like the cost of living and inflation, public safety and homelessness, taxes, and government. While the state does not study why public perceptions have changed over time, it is apparent that other public services (e.g., police, fire/rescue, hospitals, higher education) do more to market their services or otherwise demonstrate their value to the public that, in turn, positively impacts funding.

To identify strategies to better advocate for public education funding, the Washington Association of School Administrators has collaborated with Hanover Research (Hanover) to review available secondary research on strategies to improve public perceptions of education. This report draws on literature examining best practices to advocate for improved funding in education specifically and government services generally. The report includes the following sections:

- **Section I** reviews strategies organizations can use within an advocacy coalition to generate public support for public education.
- **Section II** reviews best practices for strategic communications planning to support advocacy.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover suggests the following recommendations.



**Lead a coalition for funding advocacy.** In states that successfully improve school funding policies, coordinating organizations lead coalitions of diverse constituent groups including district superintendents, educators' associations, and community leaders that build public support for improvement. Leveraging a coalition is the most effective strategy for addressing complex challenges that are beyond the scope of a single agency or organization, and can be used across public service sectors to influence policies.



**Develop a strategic communication plan.** Strategic communication plans ensure messaging from all members of an advocacy coalition aligns and reinforces key themes. For example, the Funding Illinois' Future Coalition aligned messaging from member organizations, even when those organizations had different priorities, by developing a strategic communications plan with guiding principles for advocacy.



**Cite rigorous research to demonstrate the benefits of investments in education.** Messaging to support increased funding will be most effective if it draws on rigorous evidence to demonstrate the need for improved funding. For example, Fund Our Future Nevada, an advocacy coalition formed to advocate for improvements in Nevada's state funding system, used an independent study commissioned by the Nevada Department of Education and data on educational resources and outcomes in Nevada to demonstrate the need for its proposed reforms.

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<sup>1</sup>Cascade Public Media. (2024). Crosscut Elway Poll: 2024 Legislative Preview.

<https://crosscut.com/sites/default/files/uploads/2024/01/crosscut-elway-poll-0123-combo-for-publication.pdf>

# KEY FINDINGS



**Successful coalitions to build support for changes in funding often rely on one or two organizations within the state to coordinate the work of other coalition partners, which may include district superintendents as well as associations of educators and community leaders.** Coalitions are most effective when they include representatives of diverse groups within the community, including district-level leadership, associations of educators, and community organizations as well as representatives of students and families. Diverse coalitions maximize the membership of advocacy coalitions and can achieve stronger public support by representing the community.



**Strategic communications planning is essential for aligning coalition members around a shared communication strategy.** Strategic communications plans for advocacy coalitions ensure that coalition members align their work and communicate a consistent message around the need for improved funding, even when they may have different priorities. The strategic planning process clarifies objectives for communications and helps advocacy organizations identify target audiences for communications.



**The most effective strategic communications plans combine one-way communications formats such as newsletters and websites with two-way communications formats such as open meetings.** Two-way communication takes the form of an interactive dialogue between individuals or organizations in which all participants have the opportunity to provide input and information. This dialogue allows public agencies to receive information from the public about their needs and priorities, enabling agencies to improve their services to meet these needs and craft messaging that informs the public how agency services align with its priorities.



**Advocacy coalitions need support from champions within state and local governments to secure the passage of funding reforms.** Because most state legislators lack a detailed understanding of education funding, legislators often rely on colleagues or individuals within the executive branch of state government to lead decision-making. These individuals can serve as political champions to lead the passage of legislation increasing state funding.

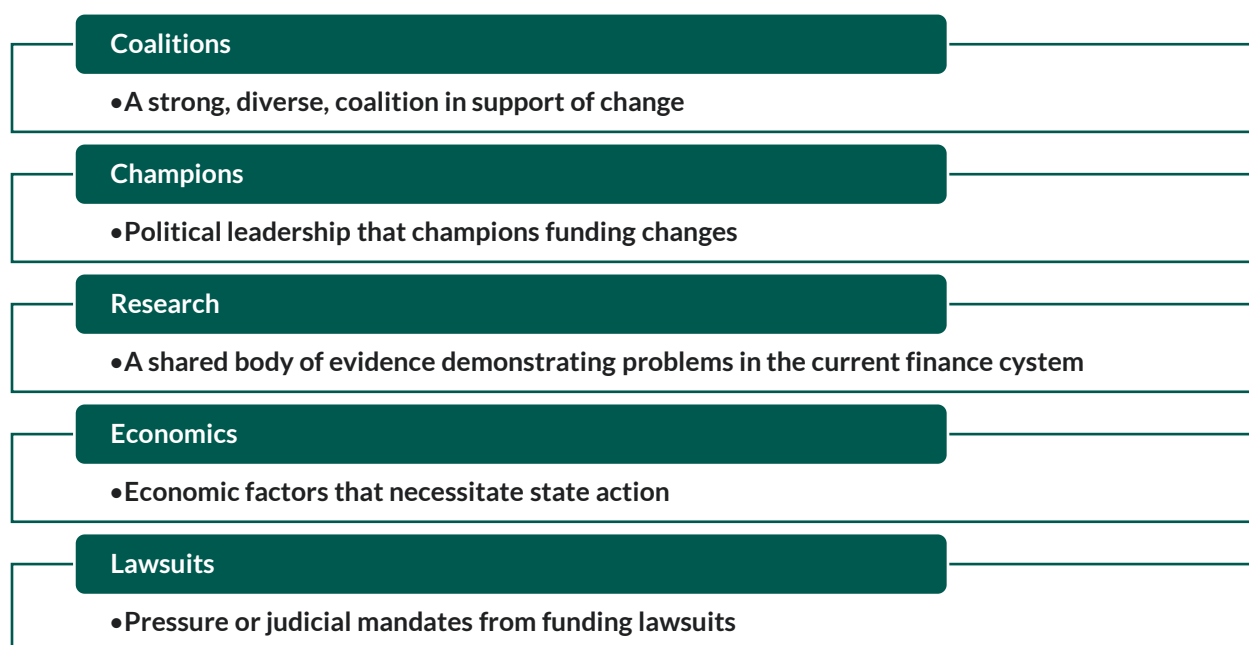


**Addressing political polarization and opposition is a significant challenge in securing legislative support for education funding.** In politically divided states, schools will need to attract cross-partisan support to increase or maintain funding. Effective advocacy coalitions develop full understanding of any opposition to their proposals and strategies opponents are likely to adopt. From this understanding, coalitions develop plans to counter these strategies and yet remain open to negotiation.

# SECTION I: GENERATING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

In this section, Hanover reviews strategies advocacy organizations can use to increase support for funding public education. A 2023 study published by Bellwether Education Partners draws on interviews with advocacy leaders in six states that have successfully enacted reforms to increase equity in state education funding. The study identifies five common conditions that contribute to the success of funding reform initiatives, listed in Figure 1.1. However, these factors vary in the extent to which they can be influenced by district and state leaders. For example, economic factors are largely out of the hands of school leadership. Likewise, state and district leaders can provide testimony and research to support lawsuits for more equitable funding, but the outcomes of these lawsuits are ultimately dependent on the judicial system. Education leaders have more ability to build coalitions in support of change, connect with political leadership to champion funding changes and provide research in support of equitable funding.<sup>2</sup> In the remainder of this section, Hanover reviews strategies to build coalitions, use research to demonstrate the benefits of improving funding, and recruit political champions. This section concludes with a discussion of strategies to address political polarization and opposition to improved school funding.

Figure 1.1: Common Conditions for Successful Funding Initiatives



Source: Bellwether Education Partners<sup>3</sup>

## BUILDING COALITIONS TO SUPPORT FUNDING

The Bellwether study finds that successful coalitions often rely on one or two organizations within the state to coordinate the work of other coalition partners, which may include district superintendents as well as associations of educators and community leaders.<sup>4</sup> Coalitions represent diverse groups and organizations within a community that come together in support of a common goal. Leveraging a coalition is the most

<sup>2</sup> Dammu, I. and B. O’Keefe. “Making Change: A State Advocacy Playbook for Equitable Education Finance.” Bellwether Education Partners, January 2023. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=public+education+funding+advocacy&ft=on&id=ED626178>

<sup>3</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

effective strategy for addressing complex challenges that are beyond the scope of a single agency or organization, and can be used across public service sectors to influence policies.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1.2 presents a suggested process for developing an advocacy coalition.

**Figure 1.2: Suggested Process for Developing an Advocacy Coalition**



Source: Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas<sup>6</sup>

Coalitions are most effective when they include representatives of diverse groups within the community. Diversity maximizes the membership of advocacy coalitions and can achieve stronger public support by representing the community.<sup>7</sup> Coordinating partners can also recruit student groups to join advocacy coalitions. For example, the Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute Coalition, a leadership organization of students with Hispanic heritage in New York, prepares students to advocate for

<sup>5</sup> "Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition." Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/start-a-coalition/main>

<sup>6</sup> Chart contents adapted from: "Creating and Maintaining Coalitions and Partnerships." Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/creating-and-maintaining-coalitions-and-partnerships>

<sup>7</sup> "Promoting Participation Among Diverse Group." Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/diverse-participation/main>

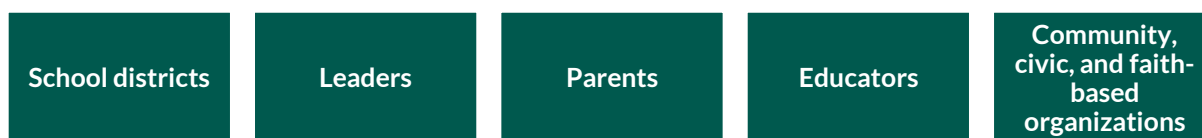
issues affecting their community at the New York State Assembly.<sup>8</sup> Students meet with members of the State Assembly and United States Congress to advocate on behalf of funding for public education.<sup>9</sup>

Advocacy coalition partners align around the need for improved funding, but may not agree on all issues. For example, teachers unions in Nevada collaborated with charter schools, with which they typically disagree on issues related to school choice, to successfully advocate for equitable school funding. When recruiting potential coalition partners, coordinating organizations should consider individuals and organizations who do not align with their goals on other issues, but would be supportive of improved funding. Coordinating partners can minimize the potential for disagreement within the coalition to derail advocacy efforts by developing funding proposals that equitably support all members.<sup>10</sup> To minimize the impact of disagreement on the cohesiveness of advocacy coalitions, coalitions should focus on a limited set of key priorities all members can agree on, and avoid commenting on emerging issues that do not directly relate to those priorities. Advocates should also work to understand their own and their opponents' values and seek to find elements of common ground without compromising their core values.<sup>11</sup> Coordinating partners should also be prepared to regroup and reconstitute the coalition as priorities evolve and some members decide that the coalition no longer aligns with their goals.<sup>12</sup>

### SPOTLIGHT – FUNDING ILLINOIS' FUTURE COALITION

Funding Illinois' Future provides an example of an advocacy coalition that successfully leveraged diverse coalition partners to secure the passage of funding improvements. The organization includes approximately 100 members, representing the constituent groups presented in Figure 1.3.<sup>13</sup> Advance Illinois, a nonprofit advocacy organization, appears to have served as the coalition's coordinating partner and designed the Evidence-Based Funding formula for which the coalition advocated.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 1.3: Funding Illinois' Future Members**



Source: Funding Illinois' Future<sup>15</sup>

Securing diverse membership in Funding Illinois' Future was initially challenging due to a history of competition for funding among urban, rural, and suburban school districts. Securing support from geographically diverse districts was essential to secure passage of the proposal in the state legislature, as legislators from rural districts would have been unwilling to support a bill that primarily benefited urban districts. Advance Illinois addressed this challenge by including representatives of diverse school districts in its advocacy coalition and crafting a proposal that equitably met the needs of all districts.<sup>16</sup> The proposal maintains the initial funding level for all districts while directing additional state appropriations to the

<sup>8</sup> Jensen, A. "About." Angelo Del Toro Puerto Rican/Hispanic Youth Leadership Institute, June 25, 2018. <https://prhyli.org/about/>

<sup>9</sup> Cruz, G.I. "My Seven-Part Recipe for Advocacy." *School Administrator*, 80:11, December 2023. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=173984419&site=ehost-live&scope=site&authtype=sso&custid=ns243584>

<sup>10</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cox, L. and K. Nussle. "Crossing the Partisan Divide in Education Policy." The Aspen Institute, March 8, 2024. p. 16. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/crossing-the-partisan-divide-in-education-policy/>

<sup>12</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> "About Us." Funding Illinois' Future. <https://fundingillfuture.org/about-us/>

<sup>14</sup> "Equitable Funding & Resources." Advance Illinois. <https://www.advanceillinois.org/policy-areas/equitable-funding-resources>

<sup>15</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: "About Us," Op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 3.

districts identified as most underfunded using the new Evidence-Based funding formula.<sup>17</sup> Funding Illinois' Future ensured the advocacy work of coalition partners was aligned even when partners had different priorities by developing a communications strategy with guiding principles that each partner was expected to align with.<sup>18</sup>

Funding Illinois' Future advocated for the passage of its proposed funding formula using diverse outreach tactics, including those listed in Figure 1.4.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Funding Illinois' Future held approximately 40 town hall meetings to educate the general public about the need for reforms to funding.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 1.4: Funding Illinois' Future Outreach Tactics**



Source: Funding Illinois' Future<sup>21</sup>

Funding Illinois' Future's advocacy work led to the successful passage of a new formula in August of 2017. Currently, Funding Illinois' Future continues to advocate for full funding of the new formula. This advocacy work includes videos with district examples highlighting the educational benefits of adequate funding and legislative testimony.<sup>22</sup>

## USING RESEARCH TO DEMONSTRATE THE BENEFITS OF EDUCATION SPENDING

**Messaging to support increased funding will be most effective if it draws on rigorous evidence to demonstrate the need for improved funding.** This evidence may include financial analysis of current spending as well as empirical research linking funding decisions to student outcomes. For example, the School and State Finance Project, a nonprofit advocacy organization, provided research to support the passage of school finance improvements in Connecticut.<sup>23</sup>

Advocates can cite a broad range of benefits, including financial outcomes as well as nonfinancial outcomes such as civic engagement. A report prepared by the Education Law Center to advocate for improved funding of schools in Pennsylvania identifies benefits of public education that include economic benefits as well as reduced mortality rates and increased civic participation. Figure 1.5 summarizes the key benefits cited by this report.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 1.5: Benefits of Public Education Cited by the Education Law Center**

- High school dropouts are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and three times more likely to receive welfare assistance, costing billions of dollars nationally each year for government-funded assistance programs.
- Decreasing the number of high school dropouts by half would nationally produce \$45 billion per year in net economic benefit to society.
- Improved education and more stable employment greatly increase tax revenue, such as a return of at least 7 dollars for every dollar invested in pre-kindergarten education.

<sup>17</sup> "About Us," Op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> "About Us," Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: "About Us," Op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Mitra, D. "Pennsylvania's Best Investment: The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education." Education Law Center, 2011. p. 3. [https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/BestInvestment\\_Full\\_Report\\_6.27.11.pdf](https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/BestInvestment_Full_Report_6.27.11.pdf)



- Nearly half (41%) of all prisoners have not completed high school, compared to 18 percent of the general adult population. The annual cost of incarcerating an individual is about \$32,000, while the annual cost of a quality public education is about \$11,000.
- A 5% increase in the male graduate rate would save \$5 billion in crime-related expenses.
- Mortality decreases for every additional year in schooling by 7.2% for men and 6% for women, and the chances of optimum health are up to 8 times higher for citizens with eighteen years of education versus only seven.
- Graduating from high school improves the quality of health, reduces dependence on public health programs by 60 percent, and cuts by six times the rate of alcohol abuse.
- National savings in public health costs would exceed \$40 billion if every high school dropout in just a single year would graduate. Average annual public health costs are \$2,700 per dropout, \$1,000 per high school graduate, and \$170 per college graduate.
- A 1-year increase in median education level is associated with a more than 13% jump in political primary turnout.

Source: Education Law Center<sup>25</sup>

## SPOTLIGHT – FUND OUR FUTURE NEVADA

Fund Our Future Nevada provides an example of an advocacy coalition that leverages research to support its advocacy work.<sup>26</sup> Empower Nevada's Future, a nonprofit advocacy organization, coordinated Fund Our Future Nevada to address the Nevada legislature's tendency to offset new revenue sources for education by decreasing other appropriations.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, the Nevada Department of Education commissioned an independent study of the state's school finance system. This study updates a previous report published in 2012, which benchmarked Nevada's funding system against peer states, analyzing changes in peer states' financing systems and updating the original report's analysis of funding options for Nevada, and presents recommendations for improving Nevada's finance system to enhance equity.<sup>28</sup>

Fund Our Future Nevada cited the study's findings in a letter to the Nevada Legislative Commission on Education as proof that the state's funding system was outdated and in need of reform. The letter also cites data on educational outcomes in Nevada, including teacher salaries, class sizes, and student assessment scores, to demonstrate that inequitable funding negatively affects educational outcomes.<sup>29</sup> In addition to writing to the legislature, Fund Our Future Nevada used the study to educate the general public about the need for funding reform, leading to public pressure for action by the legislature.<sup>30</sup>

Fund Our Future Nevada's advocacy led to the passage of a funding reform initiative in 2019. However, coalition members disagreed about the level of funding for the reforms, leading the coalition to dissolve and reform as Educate Nevada Now.<sup>31</sup> Educate Nevada Now continues to advocate for full funding of education in Nevada, highlighting data on education spending, resources, and outcomes. Figure 1.6 presents Educate Nevada Now's priorities for the current legislative session.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> "Home." Empower Nevada's Future. <https://www.empowernevadasfuture.org>

<sup>28</sup> "Nevada School Finance Study." Augenblick, Palaich and Associates; Education Commission of the States; Picus Odden and Associates, October 22, 2018. p. 2. <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Division/Research/Library/Documents/ReportsToLeg/2017-2019/283-19.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> "Letter to Legislative Commission on Education." Fund Our Future Nevada, June 20, 2018. p. 3. <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/App/InterimCommittee/REL/Document/12272>

<sup>30</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> "ENN K-12 Legislative Priorities." Educate Nevada Now. p. . <https://educatenevadanow.com/82nd-leg-session/>

Figure 1.6: Educate Nevada Now Legislative Priorities

Honor the intent of the school funding formula by:	Increasing state funding for public education, so it aligns with the intent of the Pupil-Centered Funding Plan. The new formula aimed to have a long-term plan that increases funding proportional to economic growth and inflation. It also aimed to avoid supplanting the state general fund's contribution to education with increasing or new revenue sources.
	Ensuring equitable opportunities for academically vulnerable students by implementing at-risk weighted funding that addresses the needs of all students in poverty or struggling to meet academic proficiency. Any effort to define eligibility for the at-risk weight should address the needs of all students who are not-proficient in core subjects, be developed with transparency and community input, and avoid arbitrary limitations.
Ensure equitable opportunities for career and technical programs (CTE)	Public school CTE programs should enjoy the same benefits as private schools – access to resources via a tax credit scholarship program. For several years, businesses could donate to private schools and receive a tax credit. However, they do not have a way to support public schools, and specifically, programs that enhance the very workforce they need to foster. This is inherently inequitable, and CTE programs in public schools should benefit from a tax credit scholarship that prepares students for the 21st-Century economy.
Avoid Expansion of Harmful Private School Voucher Schemes	Limited state resources should be devoted to public, rather than private, schools. Private school voucher schemes lack accountability and transparency, and can result in misuse of dollars, discrimination and poor outcomes for students. Private schools that receive tax dollars via the Opportunity Scholarship voucher scheme can choose 1) which academic assessments to give, making student growth or decline difficult to assess, 2) whether to keep or share important data, 3) to hire unlicensed or unqualified educators, and 4) which students to accept or reject for nearly any reason.

Source: Educate Nevada Now<sup>33</sup>

## RECRUITING CHAMPIONS WITHIN GOVERNMENT

Coalitions also need support from champions within state and local governments to secure the passage of funding reforms. Because most state legislators lack a detailed understanding of education funding, legislators often rely on colleagues or individuals within the executive branch of state government to lead decision-making. These individuals can serve as political champions to lead the passage of legislation increasing state funding. For example, the Governor of California and the President of the California State Board of Education served as champions for the passage of California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. In contrast, leaders of the state legislature served as champions of the Blueprint for Maryland's

<sup>33</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: "ENN K-12 Legislative Priorities," Op. cit.

Future in the face of opposition from the Governor of Maryland, enabling the legislature to override a veto and secure increased funding.<sup>34</sup> Effective champions meet the criteria listed in Figure 1.7.

**Figure 1.7: Criteria for Effective Funding Reform Champions**

**The champion holds a position with influence over education policies and budgets within the state's legislative or executive branch (ex. state governor, state house of representatives speaker, senior policy adviser, state commissioner of education)**

**The champion believes in the importance of the proposed funding reform**

**The champion is willing to dedicate political capital to secure passage of the reform**

Source: Bellwether Education Partners<sup>35</sup>

Coordinating organizations can recruit champions within government through direct advocacy within the legislative and executive branches. This advocacy may include identifying individuals in key positions who already support funding improvements or working with individuals to develop their understanding of the need for funding improvements.<sup>36</sup> Senior executive branch officials such as state governors may be particularly valuable champions because they can provide political “cover” for policy changes that might otherwise provoke opposition.<sup>37</sup> Figure 1.8 presents recommendations for advocating to legislative and executive branch officials.

**Figure 1.8: Recommendations for Legislative and Executive Branch Advocacy**

**Volunteer to meet with elective representatives at the state or federal level and consider inviting officials to visit schools**

**Explain the challenge and offer potential solutions**

**Partner with districts and regional service agencies, as well as community members such as families, employers, postsecondary leaders, and leaders of civic and faith organizations**

**Plan messaging in advance to ensure that the call to action is understood by the**

Source: School Administrator<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Dammu and O’Keefe, Op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Cox and Nussle, Op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Cruz, Op. cit.

## ADDRESSING POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND OPPOSITION

The challenge of securing legislative support for education funding is enhanced by the increased polarization of education policy at the federal, state, and local levels. A 2022 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center finds the majority of Republican voters (61 percent) believe K-12 schools have a negative effect on the United States, compared to only 26 percent of Democratic voters.<sup>39</sup> District initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion have also sparked public controversy and resistance, including electoral defeats of officials who supported these policies.<sup>40</sup> In politically divided states, schools will need to attract cross-partisan support to increase or maintain funding. A 2024 study by the Aspen Institute, a nonpartisan advocacy organization, finds that education policy initiatives are more likely to secure cross-partisan support when they incorporate the elements listed in Figure 1.9.

**Figure 1.9: Elements of Education Policy Initiatives that Garner Cross-Partisan Support**

### Easy to Communicate and Broad Appeal

- Policies should be straightforward and resonate with a wide audience.

### Responsiveness to Local Context

- Tailoring policies to meet local needs and garnering support from local leaders are crucial.

### Political Cover

- It can be helpful to provide protection and support for policymakers advocating new or unconventional positions.

### Mutual Wins

- Policies should be structured so that all parties involved can claim success.

### Media Influence

- Utilizing media effectively can raise awareness and accelerate policy movements.

Source: The Aspen Institute<sup>41</sup>

Even when advocacy coalitions can generate cross-partisan support for funding improvements, substantial changes to funding policies are likely to generate opposition. Advocacy coalitions should develop a full understanding of the opposition to their proposals and the strategies opponents are likely to adopt and develop a plan to counter these strategies while remaining open to negotiation.<sup>42</sup> A diverse advocacy coalition that engages in two-way communication can navigate opposition and polarization by identifying constituents' concerns and addressing these concerns through policy and messaging.<sup>43</sup> Coordinating organizations can use the checklist presented in Figure 1.10 to design policy proposals and messaging to overcome opposition.

**Figure 1.10: Checklist for Designing Messages to Overcome Opposition**

- ☐ Assess the ease of communication and broad appeal of the policy.
- ☐ Evaluate the policy's responsiveness to local needs and contexts, and who will speak to those local concerns with credibility.
- ☐ Identify sources of political cover and support.

<sup>39</sup> Hatfield, J. "Partisan Divides over K-12 Education in 8 Charts." Pew Research Center, June 5, 2023.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/05/partisan-divides-over-k-12-education-in-8-charts/>

<sup>40</sup> Cohn, C. "Public Schools as Contested Places." *School Administrator*, February 1, 2023.

<https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/public-schools-as-contested-places>

<sup>41</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Cox and Nussle, Op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> "How to Respond to Opposition Tactics." Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/respond-to-counterattacks/respond-to-opposition/main>

<sup>43</sup> Malloy, J., C. Russell-Rollins, and S. Katz. "Proceeding Beyond Polarity." *School Administrator*, November 2023.

<https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/proceeding-beyond-polarity>

- ☐ Ensure the policy allows for mutual wins across the political spectrum.
- ☐ Utilize media strategically to support policy initiatives.
- ☐ Understand the political and educational landscape thoroughly.
- ☐ Set realistic goals and manage expectations accordingly.
- ☐ Consider the impact of policies on frontline education workers.
- ☐ Frame policies to enhance inclusion and expand opportunities.

Source: Aspen Institute<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Cox and Nussle, Op. cit., p. 4.

## SECTION II: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

Strategic communications plans support public agencies, including school districts and state education agencies, in maintaining positive relations with the public.<sup>45</sup> Coordinating partners in successful advocacy coalitions align coalition members around a shared communication strategy. For example, the above referenced Funding Illinois' Future Coalition developed a communications strategy to ensure that messaging across coalition members aligned even when coalition members focused on different areas of emphasis.<sup>46</sup> According to the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), a national professional association of school-based public relations professionals, developed a comprehensive communications strategy for education. These components are listed in Figure 2.1.<sup>47</sup> In this section, Hanover reviews the strategic planning process, including best practices for identifying communications goals and target audiences.

**Figure 2.1: Components of a Comprehensive Communications Plan for Education**

Establishing communication as a priority through policy
Maximizing communication with trained leadership at the executive level
Supporting communication with sufficient resources and ongoing training
Ensuring communication effectiveness through adherence to code of ethics
Managing communication through RACE - Research, Analyze, Communicate, Evaluate
Understand communication needs and requirements through research
Communication effectiveness embedded across operations
Deploying multiple and varied communication strategies, including accommodations for diversity
Effectively managing communications through the news media
Effectively engaging target audiences through social media
Effective crisis communication plans and procedures
Effective finance communications
Supporting constituent involvement/engagement through communication
Evaluating communication effectiveness to inform strategy

Source: National School Public Relations Association<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Lee, M., G. Neely, and K. Stewart, eds. *The Practice of Government Public Relations*. CRC Press, 2012. p. 145.  
<https://andrerahman.staff.uns.ac.id/files/2015/10/ASPA-Series-in-Public-Administration-and-Public-Policy-Mordecai-Lee-Grant-Neeley-Kendra-Stewart-The-Practice-of-Government-Public-Relations-CRC-Press-2011.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Dammu and O'Keefe, Op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> "School Communication Benchmarking Project: Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures." National School Public Relations Association, February 2018. p. 8.  
<https://www.scasd.org/cms/lib/PA01000006/Centricity/Domain/81/NSPRA%20Benchmarking%20RubricsCommunications11-20-18.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim with minor alterations from: "School Communication Benchmarking Project: Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures," Op. cit., p. 8.

## THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The strategic planning process clarifies objectives for communications and helps advocacy organizations identify target audiences for communications.<sup>49</sup> Figure 2.2 presents a suggested process for developing a strategic communication plan for a government agency.

**Figure 2.2: Suggested Process for Developing a Strategic Communication Plan**



Source: The Practice of Government Public Relations<sup>50</sup>

The NSPRA recommends using the Research, Analyze, Communicate, Evaluate (RACE) model illustrated in Figure 2.3 for planning public relations campaigns related to education.<sup>51</sup> Initially developed in the 1950s, the RACE model is considered a standard best practice for marketing and public relations across sectors.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> "Creating a Communications Plan." The Wallace Foundation, September 2023. p. 3.

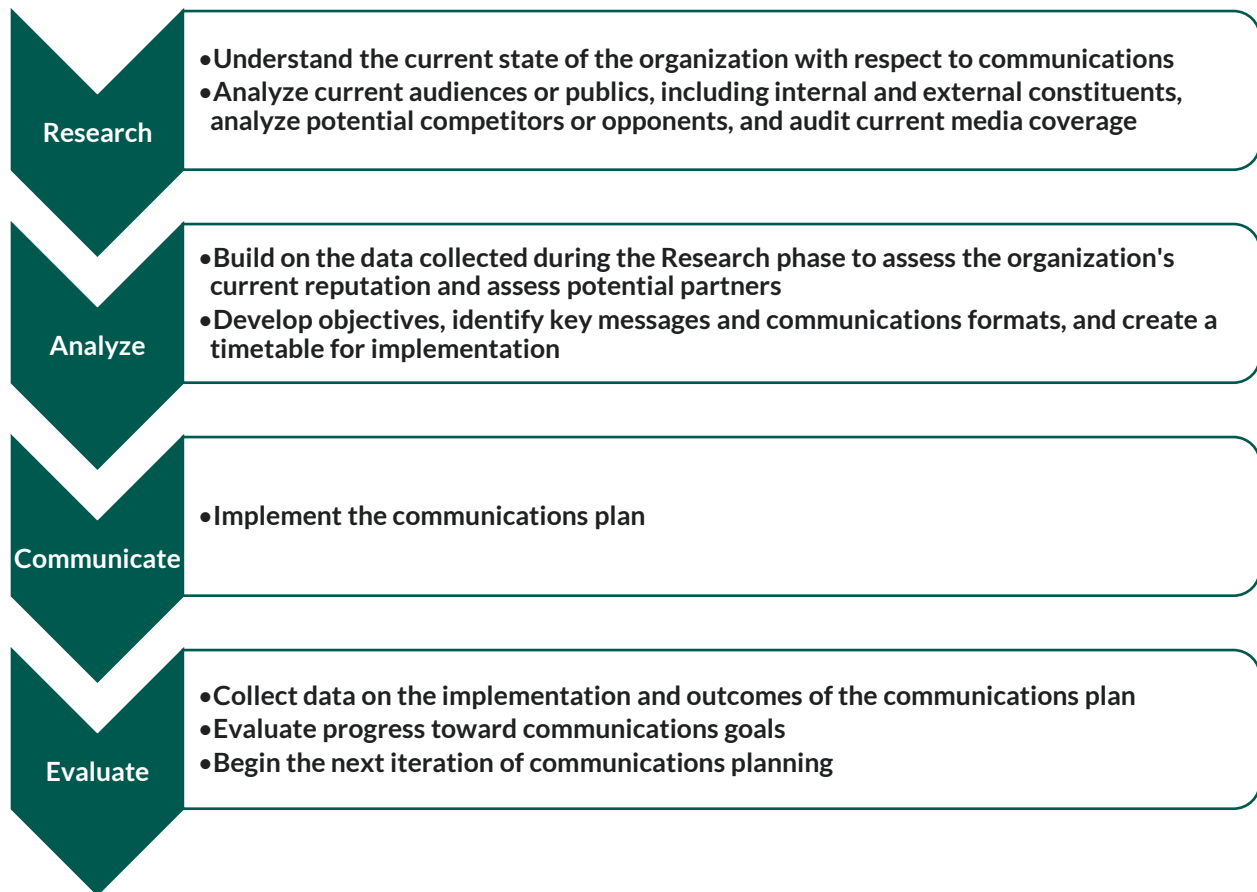
<https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Workbook-A-Communication.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Lee, Neely, and Stewart, Op. cit., pp. 147–153.

<sup>51</sup> "School Communication Benchmarking Project: Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures," Op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> Sommers, S. *Marketing To Win: Creating and Sustaining Your Non-Profit Brand*. Civil Sector Press, 2013. pp. 6–8. Accessed via Google Books

Figure 2.3: RACE Model for Public Relations Planning



Source: Marketing To Win: Creating and Sustaining Your Non-Profit Brand<sup>53</sup>

## IDENTIFYING GOALS AND TARGET AUDIENCES

The strategic planning process for communications begins by establishing goals for the communications initiative. As with other strategic planning initiatives, strategic plan goals for communications should meet the SMART criteria outlined in Figure 2.4.<sup>54</sup> **Strong goals identify desired outcomes and how organizations measure progress toward and achievement of those outcomes.**<sup>55</sup> The acronym SMART identifies key areas in effective goal setting: **S**trategic and **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**esults-Based, and **T**ime-Bound. With the SMART structure, goals use baseline and target data to hold stakeholders accountable through effective communication and an established system for evaluating progress.<sup>56</sup> The following figure details the components of SMART goals.

<sup>53</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Ibid.

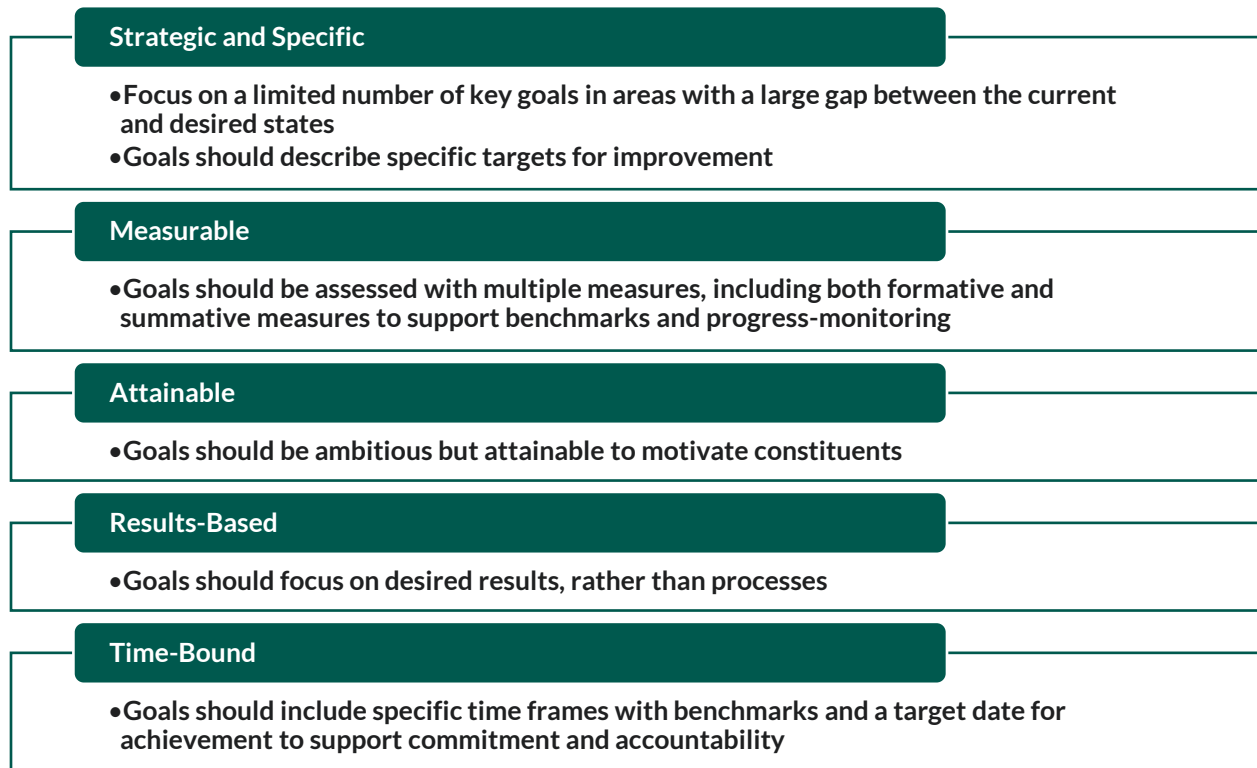
<sup>54</sup> "Creating a Communications Plan," Op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> "Setting Student Achievement SMART Goals for School Improvement." Minnesota Department of Education, July 22, 2016, p. 1.  
[https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_FILE&dDocName=mde058894&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary](https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=mde058894&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary)

<sup>56</sup> Warren, P. and G. Carrillo. "Implementing Local Accountability in California's Schools: The First Year of Planning." Public Policy Institute of California, March 2015. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/implementing-local-accountability-in-californias-schools-the-first-year-of-planning/>



Figure 2.4: Components of SMART Goals



Source: Solutions Tree Press<sup>57</sup>

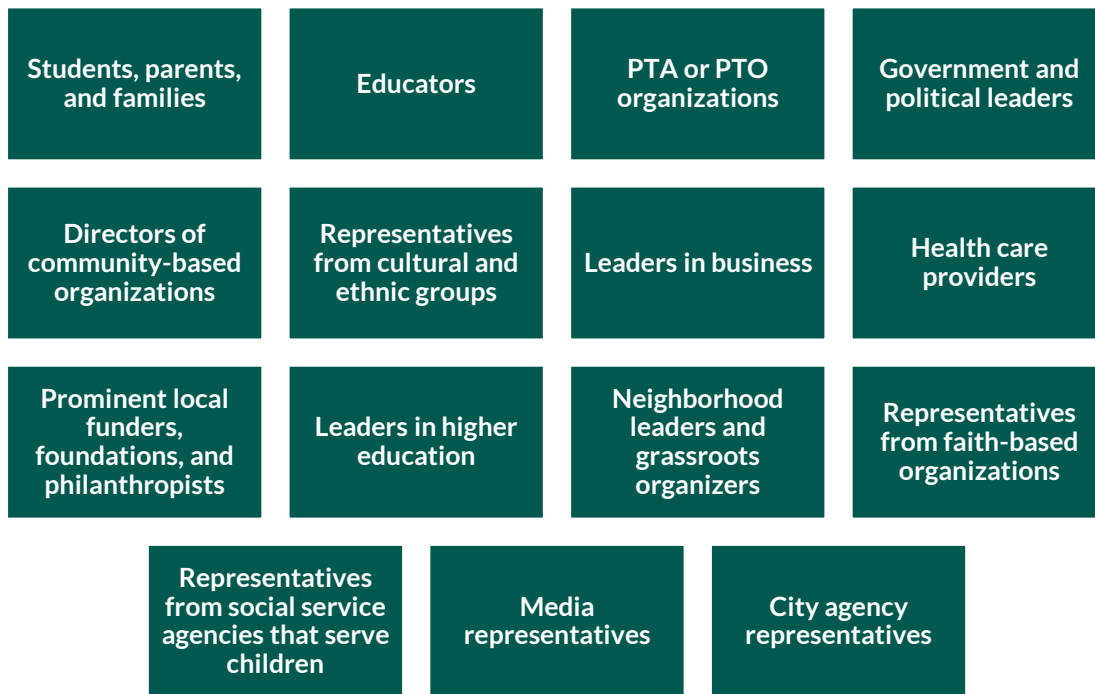
After identifying SMART goals, advocacy coalitions can identify the key audiences they will need to reach to achieve these goals. A 2023 report on advocating for out-of-school-time (OST) programs by the Wallace Foundation identifies potential key audiences for communications to advocate for funding for initiatives related to education, listed in Figure 2.5.<sup>58</sup> In particular, the Wallace Foundation notes that developing positive relationships with media outlets such as newspapers and television stations helps advocacy coalitions shape opinions across the community.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Figure adapted from: Conzemius, A. and J. O'Neill. *The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning*. Solution Tree Press, 2009. p. Page numbers not provided. Accessed via Google Books.

<sup>58</sup> "Creating a Communications Plan," Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

**Figure 2.5: Potential Key Audiences for Education Funding Advocacy**

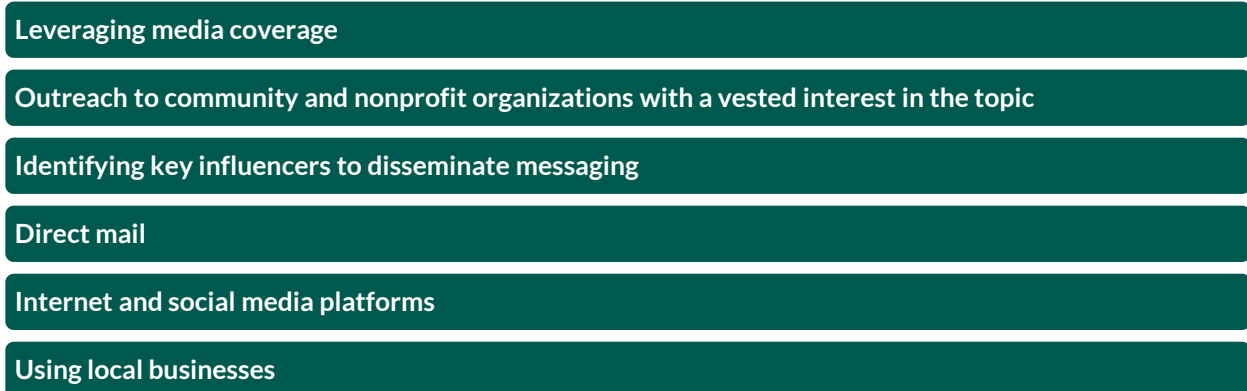


Source: The Wallace Foundation<sup>60</sup>

## IDENTIFYING COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS

After identifying target audiences, advocacy coalitions need to identify the messages they want to communicate to target audiences and the formats they will use to communicate them. The selection of communication formats depends on the needs and preferences of the target audience, so advocacy coalitions should identify their audience members' preferred methods for receiving information.<sup>61</sup> Potential communications formats for advocacy related to funding education programs include those listed in Figure 2.6.

**Figure 2.6: Potential Communications Formats for Education Advocacy**



Source: The Wallace Foundation<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Ibid.

The most effective strategic communications plans combine one-way communications formats such as newsletters and websites with two-way communications formats such as open meetings.<sup>63</sup> Two-way communication differs from traditional one-way communication, which has historically been the dominant communication method for public agencies. In a one-way communication model, an individual or organization disseminates information to a passive audience for the purposes of information or persuasion. In contrast, two-way communication takes the form of an interactive dialogue between individuals or organizations in which all participants have the opportunity to provide input and information. This dialogue allows public agencies to receive information from the public about their needs and priorities, enabling agencies to improve their services to meet these needs and craft messaging that informs the public how agency services align with its priorities.<sup>64</sup> Two-way communications also enhance constituents' commitment to supporting schools and increase engagement in advocacy efforts.<sup>65</sup> For example, advocacy organizations can host a series of community forums with different audiences such as students, parents, and teachers to present key messages and gather feedback through question-and-answer sessions.<sup>66</sup>

Advocacy coalitions can use the information gathered through two-way communications to craft key messages that address the issues key audiences are most concerned about. Figure 2.7 presents the Wallace Foundation's recommendations for crafting effective key messages.<sup>67</sup>

**Figure 2.7: Recommendations for Crafting Key Messages**

Focus on a limited number of key messages, with a maximum of three per piece of communication

Limit each key message to 15-20 words, short enough to fit on a bumper sticker

Make each key message compelling

Include a fundamental statement with two to four supporting points

Supplement data with examples of individuals who have benefited from programs

Source: The Wallace Foundation<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Garcia, M.E. et al. "Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education: Part 3: Building Trusting Relationships with Families and the Community through Effective Communication." Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, September 2016. p. 16. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=two+way+communication&ft=on&id=ED569112>

<sup>64</sup> Lee, Neely, and Stewart, Op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>65</sup> "School Communication Benchmarking Project: Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures," Op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> "Creating a Communications Plan," Op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Chart contents adapted from: Ibid., p. 13.

# ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

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