



MARKETING AND ADVOCATING FOR YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT

Prepared for Washington Association of School Administrators

August 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The 2023 Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) Membership Survey, which collected suggestions for how WASA could support and provide resources to its members, indicated that district leaders need research-based tools and strategies to increase public confidence around strategic planning and overall school district effectiveness. Over the past several years, district leaders across Washington state have been navigating the politicization of decision-making in the K-12 sector and leading highly polarized communities.

Washington superintendents and central office staff are grappling with declining enrollment caused by various factors, including lower birth rates, greater competition in school choice environments, and chronic absenteeism left over from the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, decision-making around curriculum and school operations is under scrutiny for various reasons influenced by national, state, and local politics. This environment has put historic strain on superintendent positions across the state resulting in vacancy rates well above the national average. In its role to support state school leaders, WASA leadership needs to identify research-based practices to help superintendents and central office staff improve public perception of public education in general, and their own school districts specifically.

Therefore, WASA is partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to create a toolkit for superintendents and central office staff to provide marketing and advocacy resources for Washington public school districts.

Audience

This toolkit is designed to support Washington superintendents and central office staff as they implement practices to market and advocate for their school districts.

How to Use This Toolkit

Users can reference this toolkit to enhance their knowledge of practices to market and advocate for their school district. Each section addresses one practice through the following content:

- A brief overview of the practice;
- A short **explanation of each tool**; and
- One or more **resources or tools** to assist with implementing the practice (e.g., group discussion guide, checklist, catalog of additional references).

How to Navigate This Toolkit

The different sections of this toolkit (and their respective sub-sections and tools as described above) can be accessed by clicking on the [Table of Contents](#) beginning on the next page. You may click on the section's, sub-section's, or tool's name or page number to be taken to the corresponding content.

A listing of endnotes cited throughout the toolkit is also accessible through the Table of Contents. You may access individual endnotes by clicking the endnote number presented. You can return to the content corresponding to each endnote by clicking the endnote number presented before the endnote information.

You can return to the Table of Contents at any time using the *Return to TOC* button at the bottom of any page in the practice sections and endnotes.



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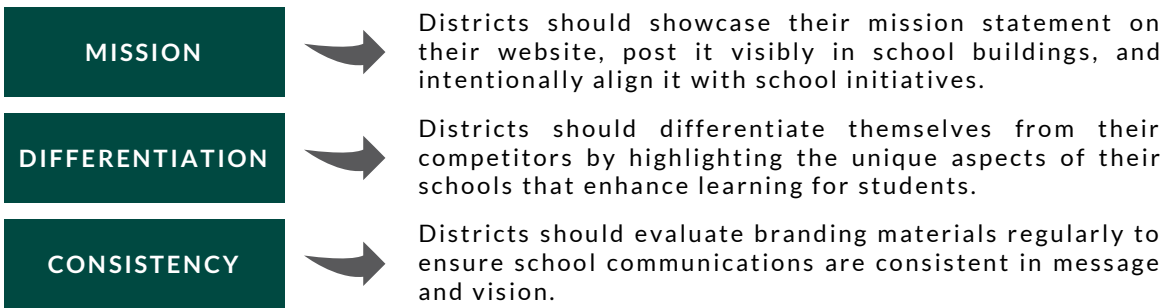
BRAND CREATION AND MARKETING



Overview

Districts should develop a school brand to ensure parents understand the value of their district’s schools. Branding is the process through which school districts establish their identity in the community, promote their mission, connect with the community, and shed positive light on their schools.¹ Districts can generate a brand by developing a mission, defining their distinctive qualities, and consistently communicating the mission and distinctions. Figure 1.1 provides additional details.

FIGURE 1.1: THREE AREAS OF SCHOOL BRANDING



Source: Skyward²

Districts can create distinct and successful brands by identifying how parents and community stakeholders feel about the district’s mission. When developing new branding plans, districts often use the National School Public Relations Association’s (NSPRA) annually published Rubrics of Practice and Suggested Measures to benchmark their communication goals.³ The NSPRA’s rubrics provide a series of metrics for districts to evaluate communication plans, internal and external communications, marketing and branding, emergency communications, and bond/finance election plans and campaigns.⁴ For example, beginning in 2015, West Fargo Public School (ND) used NSPRA rubrics to help rebrand the district based on rapidly increasing student enrollment, profiled in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2: West Fargo Public Schools (ND)

West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS), a suburban school district in North Dakota, has added an average of 500 new students and opened a new school annually since 2007. In 2015, the district hired a public relations specialist to help rebrand it due to its rapid growth. In addition to using NSPRA rubrics, WFPS used two guiding questions in its rebranding effort: “What do you stand for and believe in?” and “Does your community know what you stand for and believe in?”

WFPS examined branding from a big-picture and detailed perspective, evaluating everything from social media policies to school mascots. WFPS found creating a unified brand difficult, as the district sought to balance a district-wide identity while allowing schools to show their uniqueness. For example, many schools took their logos from the internet or used decades-old student designs. Additionally, district and school administrators were often resistant to change. Despite these challenges, WFPS debuted its new look after an eight-month rebranding process. WFPS’s rebranding efforts have been successful, with voters in September 2018 approving “a \$106.9 million referendum to build a new middle school ... and a third comprehensive high school.”

Source: National School Board Association⁵

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Districts with successful branding often find higher employee retention, higher-quality job applicants, and increased student enrollment.⁶ Historically, district administrators have not seen the importance of promoting district accomplishments. For example, Eric Sheninger, principal at New Milford High School (NJ) from 2007-2014, initially resisted using social media to promote his school's achievements. However, after he embraced it, the school saw higher student retention levels and attracted higher-quality staff applicants (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: New Milford High School (NJ)

Early in Eric Sheninger's 2007-2014 tenure as New Milford High School (NMHS) principal in New Milford, N.J., he rebuffed social media. Then came his 180-degree change. By 2009, Sheninger had joined Twitter. Since then, he's been dubbed "Principal Twitter," earned a Digital Principal Award from the National Association of Secondary Principals, and authored the book *Digital Leadership*. Sheninger's ascent from digital naysayer to leader happened when he recognized the value of communicating and celebrating improvements his high school made. He went from confiscating students' cell phones to encouraging them to use them to research and problem-solve in the classroom and witnessed them become far more engaged and successful in their schoolwork. He shared students' successes via social media, acquiring more than 152,000 Twitter followers while sticking to this simple branding strategy via social media: improve the work, share it, celebrate it.

Sheninger found that his increased social media engagement promoting NMHS led to increased student retention and higher-quality staff applicants.

Source: Education Week⁷

Once a brand is created, districts then need to market it. Marketing or selling the district brand requires understanding what the community wants to hear and how often they want to hear it. For example, according to the Center for American Progress (CAP) survey on school-home communication, information about individual student achievement is most important to parents. Therefore, districts and schools should "connect information about individual student achievement to other information that districts, schools, or teachers want parents to consider."⁸ Specifically, districts can effectively market their accomplishments by sharing disaggregated student achievement data while providing context so that parents understand why the data is being shared this way.⁹

Creating external communication plans helps districts strengthen connections with families and other community stakeholders, market branding and accomplishments, and provide targeted messaging. Like internal community stakeholders, parents are increasingly interested in receiving communications beyond their child(ren)'s academic performance. "Parents are interested in learning how the achievement at their child's school compares to other schools and how new education policies, online testing, and curriculum standards are impacting their child's future."¹⁰ Additionally, districts seek to provide information and influence community and business leaders, non-profit groups, and voters.¹¹ Consequently, district communication officers report three major external communication priority areas: district brand development, community engagement, and communicating information to external stakeholders.¹² Indeed, "A well-thought-out, strategic communication plan will help ensure that a school district carries out its mission and meets its goals with the support of its staff and community."¹³ Figure 1.4. lists the NSPRA's four-step plan for creating strategic communication plans.

Figure 1.4: Creating Strategic Communication Plans



Source: National School Public Relations Association¹⁴

In the strategic planning process, NSPRA recommends districts consider a multi-step approach, including stakeholder research, specific objectives, identifying different stakeholder groups, and developing strategies and tactics. Figure 1.5 describes a sample plan directors of communication, or other public information officers, might use in collaboration with other district leaders.

Figure 1.5: Strategic Communication Planning Process

STEP	DESCRIPTION
Use a Variety of Assessments	Begin by meeting with the superintendent and school board to discuss their priorities for district communication objectives. Know the district's mission and goals, and be prepared to discuss how your program can help achieve those goals.
Research	There are various questions to answer: Who are our publics (i.e., stakeholders)? What are our publics' overall perceptions of our schools? What "hot issues" are circulating among staff and the community? What issues affecting other school districts may soon be coming our way? Research tactics to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National studies and census data; ▪ Telephone logs; ▪ Media reports; ▪ Interviews with community opinion leaders; ▪ Focus groups; and ▪ Written, digital, or telephone surveys.
Develop Communication Goals and Objectives	For example, by the end of the school year, 75 percent of the district's teachers will be involved in projects to improve teacher/parent relations.
Identify Target Publics	Primary publics are those most important to achieving goals. In schools, they are often students, staff, and parents. Secondary publics are those who could be reached if money or time permits or those who are indirectly reached by public relations tactics.
Identify Desired Behavior of the Publics	For the plan to be successful, you must decide what you want the program to do. Do you want to provide information? Or do you want to reinforce or change the behavior of certain publics?

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STEP	DESCRIPTION
Identify What is Needed to Achieve Desired Behavior	Using research data, decide what actions must take place to create the behaviors you desire.
Create Strategies and Tactics	Strategies are procedures, like developing a media kit that provides general information about the school district. Tactics are the actions that must be taken to carry out the procedures, like writing the press release or printing the folder for the district media kit.
Put Your Plan on Paper	This is where you develop the budget, create a timeline, and assign responsibility for all strategies and tactics.
Implement the Plan	After management/board approval, put your plan into action. Keep your committee involved and prepare to refine along the way.
Evaluate Your Efforts	Evaluate your plan using the same methods you used in the research phase. First, evaluate the planning process: what worked and what did not. Continue to evaluate your program as it is implemented to determine what revisions may need. Finally, measure your goals and objectives to decide whether or not you have reached them.

Source: National School Public Relations Association¹⁵

Districts usually combine marketing and communication leadership responsibilities into one position. Historically, districts have not seen the need to market their accomplishments or elect to direct the focus of communications elsewhere. Additionally, districts may often lack the financial resources to hire a Marketing Director or create a communications department.¹⁶ Therefore, most marketing/communication position descriptions emphasize leading district internal and external communication as the job's core responsibility. Belvidere Community Unit School District 100 (IL) notably highlights brand promotion and increasing community stakeholders' support for public education as the primary function of its District Communications and Marketing Coordinator position (see Figure 1.6).

FIGURE 1.6: BELVIDERE COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 100 (IL) DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING COORDINATOR JOB DESCRIPTION

BASIC FUNCTION	Under the direction of the Superintendent of Schools and Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, the Communications and Marketing Coordinator will work to promote a positive image and increase community support for public education and Belvidere Community Unit School District 100.
PERFORMANCE RESPONSIBILITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to navigate and utilize social media for promoting Belvidere Community Unit School District 100. ▪ Create and utilize various modes of media to enhance district marketing and community perception. ▪ Partner with Growth Dimensions, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Belvidere and Rockford Area Association of Realtors to develop effective communication and information packets for families new to the district. ▪ Prepare and distribute press releases. ▪ Assist in responding to information inquiries from the public and media. ▪ Utilize graphic design skills to enhance District communication and publicity. ▪ Compile information on school and District events for inclusion in newsletters and posting on the website.
QUALIFICATIONS/SKILLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ BA degree (preferred) in marketing/public relations or related experience. ▪ Ability to organize, prioritize and work under time constraints. ▪ Ability to network/connect with staff and stakeholders. ▪ Ability to work well with others and with minimal supervision.

Source: Belvidere Community Unit School District 100¹⁷



Tool Explanation

The tools in this section are designed to guide leaders through understanding their district’s current brand and begin the planning process. Figure 1.7 has a detailed description of each tool.

FIGURE 1.7: BRAND CREATION AND MARKETING TOOLS

TOOL NAME	DESCRIPTION
School Branding Discussion Guide	This discussion guide facilitates conversations between district leaders about the district’s current branding.
Strategic Communication Brainstorming Sheet	This form is designed to help district leaders decide what needs to be done and who must be contacted during communication planning.

School Branding Discussion Guide

Directions: Use the questions in this discussion guide to facilitate conversations about the district's current branding. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

What is the district's mission?

Is the district's mission posted in all buildings?

Is the district's mission posted on the website?

Do all school initiatives align with the district's mission?

What differentiates the district from others?

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Do these differences enhance student learning?

Does the current branding of the district focus on these differences?

Is branding consistent across all media platforms? If not, where is it different, and why?

Source: Skyward¹⁸



Strategic Communication Brainstorming Sheet

Directions: Use this form to take notes about who needs to be contacted or what needs to be done during each step of the communication planning process.

STEP	DESCRIPTION	NOTES
Use a Variety of Assessments	Begin by meeting with the superintendent and school board to discuss their priorities for district communication objectives. Know the district's mission and goals, and be prepared to discuss how your program can help achieve those goals.	
Research	<p><i>There are various questions to answer:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are our publics (i.e., stakeholders)? • What are our publics' overall perceptions of our schools? • What "hot issues" are circulating among staff and the community? • What issues affecting other school districts may soon be coming our way? <p><i>Research tactics to consider:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National studies and census data; ▪ Telephone logs; ▪ Media reports; ▪ Interviews with community opinion leaders; ▪ Focus groups; and ▪ Written, digital, or telephone surveys. 	
Develop Communication Goals and Objectives	For example, by the end of the school year, 75 percent of the district's teachers will be involved in projects to improve teacher/parent relations.	
Identify Target Publics	Primary publics are those most important to achieving goals. In schools, they are often students, staff, and parents. Secondary publics are those who could be reached if money or time permits or those who are indirectly reached by public relations tactics.	

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STEP	DESCRIPTION	NOTES
Identify Desired Behavior of the Publics	For the plan to be successful, you must decide what you want the program to do. Do you want to provide information? Or do you want to reinforce or change the behavior of certain publics?	
Identify What is Needed to Achieve Desired Behavior	Using research data, decide what actions must take place to create the behaviors you desire.	
Create Strategies and Tactics	Strategies are procedures, like developing a media kit that provides general information about the school district. Tactics are the actions that must be taken to carry out the procedures, like writing the press release or printing the folder for the district media kit.	
Put Your Plan on Paper	This is where you develop the budget, create a timeline, and assign responsibility for all strategies and tactics.	
Implement the Plan	After management/board approval, put your plan into action. Keep your committee involved and prepare to refine along the way.	
Evaluate Your Efforts	Evaluate your plan using the same methods you used in the research phase. First, evaluate the planning process: what worked and what didn't. Continue to evaluate your program as it is implemented to determine what revisions may need. Finally, measure your goals and objectives to decide whether or not you have reached them.	

Source: National School Public Relations Association¹⁹

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Overview

A 2020 survey by CAP of K-12 parents, teachers, and school leaders found that while schools communicated most information weekly or monthly, all groups felt more frequent communication would be ideal. School leaders reported the most similarities between their current and preferred communication frequencies. Yet, stakeholders still wanted more frequent contact from districts and schools.²⁰ Additionally, the survey reveals respondents are most interested in regular communication about day-to-day matters (e.g., homework, student behavior, and logistics). Figure 2.1 shows communication topics and the average desired communication frequency by group per category. Survey respondents rated the ideal frequency of communication on a scale from “never” to “daily.”²¹

Figure 2.1: Communication Topics and Ideal Communication Frequency by Group

COMMUNICATION TOPIC	IDEAL COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY BY GROUP		
	PARENTS	TEACHERS	SCHOOL LEADERS
Teacher Qualifications and Experiences	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	Monthly
Information on School Budget Use	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	~3 weeks
College and Career Preparation Resources and Information	Monthly-Quarterly	~6 weeks	~2 weeks
Schoolwide Achievement	Monthly	Monthly-Quarterly	~2 weeks
Decision-Making Opportunities	~2 weeks	Monthly	~2 weeks
School Volunteer Opportunities	~3 Weeks	~3 Weeks	~2 weeks
Curriculum	~2 weeks	~6 weeks	~3 weeks
Disciplinary Action	~Weekly	~Weekly	~2x per week
Behavior Patterns	~Weekly	~Weekly	~Weekly
Individual Student Achievement (Progress or Challenges)	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	~2 weeks
Logistics (e.g., early dismissal, enrollment)	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	~2 weeks
Classroom or School Event	~2 weeks	~2 weeks	Weekly
Homework	~2-3x per week	~2-3x per week	~2-3x per week

Source: Center for American Progress²²

With so many ways to communicate with stakeholders, marketing leaders must determine which communication strategies are best for each topic.²³ This section discusses different communication strategies for different groups.

Mass Communication

Mass communication communications are suitable for conveying a wide variety of information quickly to various stakeholders, including, but not limited to, emergency announcements, schedule changes, and reminders of events.²⁴ In this sub-section, we discuss three mass communication methods districts can use: district and school websites, social media, and video conferencing.

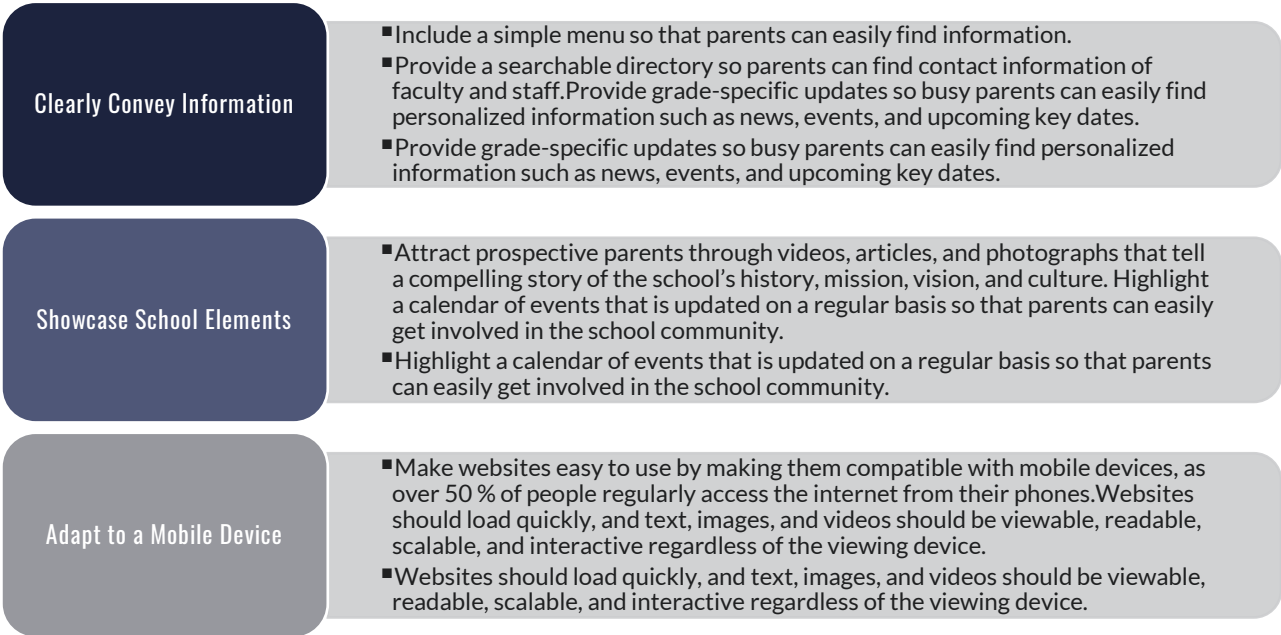
District and School Websites

District and school websites are important self-service portals for communicating information to external stakeholders. Websites should be mobile device-accessible, serve as the social media hub, and be easy to manage. Their school's website can sway parents' ideas about their

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neighborhood school. To increase school visibility and desirability, schools should create an enticing webpage.²⁵ Suggested elements of a robust website are listed in Figure 2.2.

FIGURE 2.2 DISTRICT WEBSITE GUIDELINES



Source: eSchool News²⁶

School districts should create a style guide to ensure district websites and communication materials are consistent in color and formatting. While holistic branding goes beyond choosing a color palette and consistent images, those aspects of brand management are essential starting places when developing compelling and visually pleasing communication. In addition to color palettes, schools should create templates for all written and presentational communication and plan how the language on those materials will be translated. Districts can reference Saint Paul Public School's [marketing toolkit](#) to learn how to build a brand.²⁷ Figure 2. provides links to exemplary school websites.

Figure 2.3 Exemplary School Websites with Clickable Links



Source: eSchool News²⁸

Additionally, websites often facilitate two-way communication between the district and families, assisting district administrators in promptly responding to families' concerns.²⁹ Families should be able to access links easily and submit questions that receive a response in 24-48 hours.³⁰ For example, due to COVID-19, the Klein Independent School District (TX) created a "Roadmap to Reopening" subpage. Figure 2.4 details how the district responds to questions and concerns surrounding the pandemic.



Figure 2.4: Klein Independent School District (TX)

Klein Independent School District (KISD) has a link on its “Roadmap to Reopening” webpage where families and other community stakeholders can submit questions and give suggestions. Stakeholders can ask questions regarding their student, a school/campus, or a central office department or program with specific details and can provide contact information to receive a reply. Staff monitor the responses and respond daily Monday-Friday. The “Roadmap to Reopening” also has a list of FAQs, including remote learning and student assessment.

Sources: Multiple³¹

Social Media

Social media is a compelling and helpful platform for parent engagement and communication.³² The average person explores social media for approximately two hours a day and looks at their phone 80 times daily, making it a valuable platform for district communication. Research shows that if districts post videos, clips should not exceed two and a half minutes.³³ Districts interested in using social media for parent communication can use the recommendations in [this article](#)³⁴ to learn how to set up and navigate different social media sites and can use the recommendations in [this article](#)³⁵ to ensure that student information remains private.

 Spotlight: Brockport School District	 Spotlight: Ellington Public Schools
Check out Brockport School District's Facebook page , where they post clips from meetings, lectures, events, and guest speakers. They also have 3.5 thousand followers. ³⁶	Please scroll to the bottom of Ellington Public Schools' website to view their engaging, creative, and informative Twitter posts. ³⁷

While districts and schools generally use social media to share information, school leaders must also have a visible professional presence on these platforms. Community stakeholders look for school leaders to quickly share information, listen and engage with the community, and establish two-way communication via social media. School leaders should clarify how they plan to use social media and what kinds of communications community members can expect.³⁸

Relatedly, school blogs offer a simple and accessible communication method for school and district leaders. For instance, Burlington Public Schools (MA) created a district-wide blog in 2012 to provide streamlined information to a broad audience. Although the district mostly posts news and events, several blog entries have included stakeholder feedback on various topics. For example, community members could comment on a school improvement plan between the first and second proposal readings before a final vote. Two-way conversations via the blog have allowed the district to make better-informed decisions, created more transparency, and provided community members a voice in decision processes. Many teachers in the district subsequently created blogs or websites to communicate with families.³⁹

Video Conferencing






Since the outbreak of COVID-19, video conferencing has become a go-to method of communicating with stakeholders. Identifying and selecting an official video conferencing platform is essential for districts to streamline communications and eliminate potential Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) violations. If a district already has a relationship with a video conferencing provider, all staff should default to using that platform, even if they already have personal accounts. EdWeek states, “District contracts with video conference providers typically have outlined restrictions on how and under what circumstances the company can collect and share student data.”⁴⁰ The California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) provides [a list of video conferencing resources](#) for

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schools to consider through its distance learning page, including Zoom, Microsoft, and Google Hangouts.⁴¹

As video conference meetings can be chaotic, especially with large groups of students, staff, or community members, districts and schools should follow the guidelines in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5: Guidelines for Video Conferencing Meetings

	All participants should mute their audio if they are not talking.
	The conversation leader should choose the view that suits them: one person's face at a time or a gallery of all participants.
	Use earbuds with a microphone to improve audio.
	Participants should feel comfortable turning off the video for any reason.
	Utilize additional features (e.g., sharing a whiteboard and offering nonverbal feedback).

Source: Education Week⁴²

Adapting best practices from businesses and corporations, districts can use video-conferencing applications for marketing purposes, including district news, press conferences, and public Q&A sessions with district administrators.⁴³

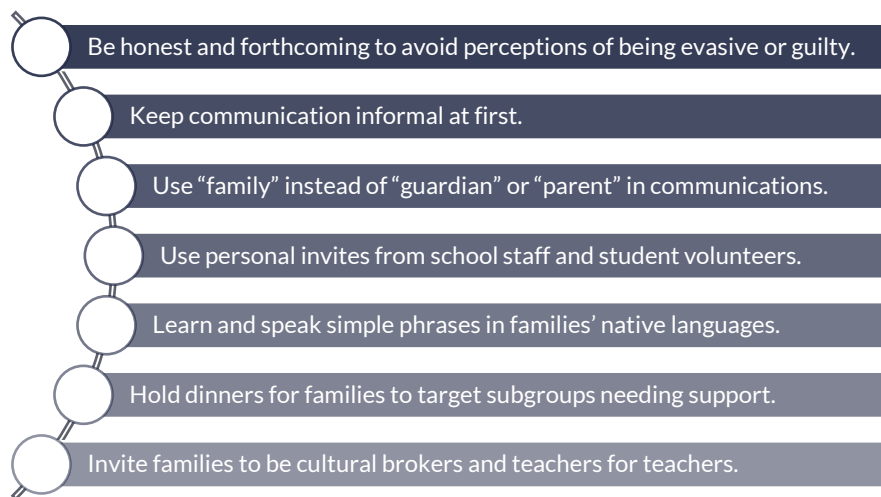
Communication with Families

Districts and schools need to have frequent and consistent two-way communication with families. Standard methods include website information, text messages, written notes, e-mails, phone calls, printed materials, and face-to-face meetings. Additionally, families should have access to multiple platforms (e.g., school websites and hotlines) to ask questions, provide comments and concerns, and suggest improvements to district and school administrators with rapid response times.⁴⁴

Individualized Communications

Impactful communication initiatives use a combination of strategies to individualize dialogue with families. For example, the Flamboyant Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports family engagement, identifies strategies to communicate with hard-to-reach families. Initial outreach to these individuals can be informal to ease communication comfort. These tips are generally applicable despite being meant for hard-to-reach families, as detailed in Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6: Strategies to Personalize Family Communications



Source: Flamboyan Foundation⁴⁵

Additionally, schools can personalize communications by including information specific to families and their students, as families are most interested in information about their child(ren). For instance, teachers might describe examples of the child’s behavior to their families in illustrating social and emotional learning skills in writing or in-person communication or by including positive highlights of a student’s week in a weekly newsletter. Personalized outreach also increases the likelihood that families look at and review communications sent to them.⁴⁶

Communication with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

District and school staff may need to take additional steps to enable proper communication with culturally and linguistically diverse families. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) notes cross-cultural communication “minimizes the confusion and frustration that people can experience when they enter an environment where not only their language, but also their attitudes, values, and behaviors differ from those of others.”⁴⁷ Cross-cultural communication considers cultural influences on how people communicate and helps educators and families of all backgrounds understand each other. Translating all written information into the native languages of families the district serves and including classroom signs in different languages help improve cross-cultural communication.⁴⁸ Figure 2.7 shows additional strategies to strengthen two-way and cross-cultural communications with culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Figure 2.7: Two-Way and Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Two-Way Communications Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Translate materials to the home language.■ Use bilingual staff members to help provide a direct link between families and the school community. Be open to hosting school meetings in a location where families feel comfortable (e.g., community centers or local businesses).■ Be open to hosting school meetings in a location where families feel comfortable (e.g., community centers or local businesses).
Cross-Cultural Communications Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Begin the conversation on a personal level rather than starting with a formal progress report. Allow personal life to be mixed with the discussion of academics.■ Show respect for the whole family, instead of paying attention to the child who is the focus of the conference.■ Use indirect questions or observations rather than questions asking for information about the child at home (for example, "Some parents prefer to have an older child help with homework..." rather than, "Do you or someone else help the child with her homework?").■ Discuss student achievements in the context of all students, suggesting how the child contributes to everyone's well-being.■ Explain goals and expectations of the school and help parents and family members find ways in which they are comfortable supporting their children's learning. Create a sense of common purpose and caring using the pronoun "we" rather than "you" and "I."■ Create a sense of common purpose and caring using the pronoun "we" rather than "you" and "I."

Source: Institute of Education Sciences⁴⁹

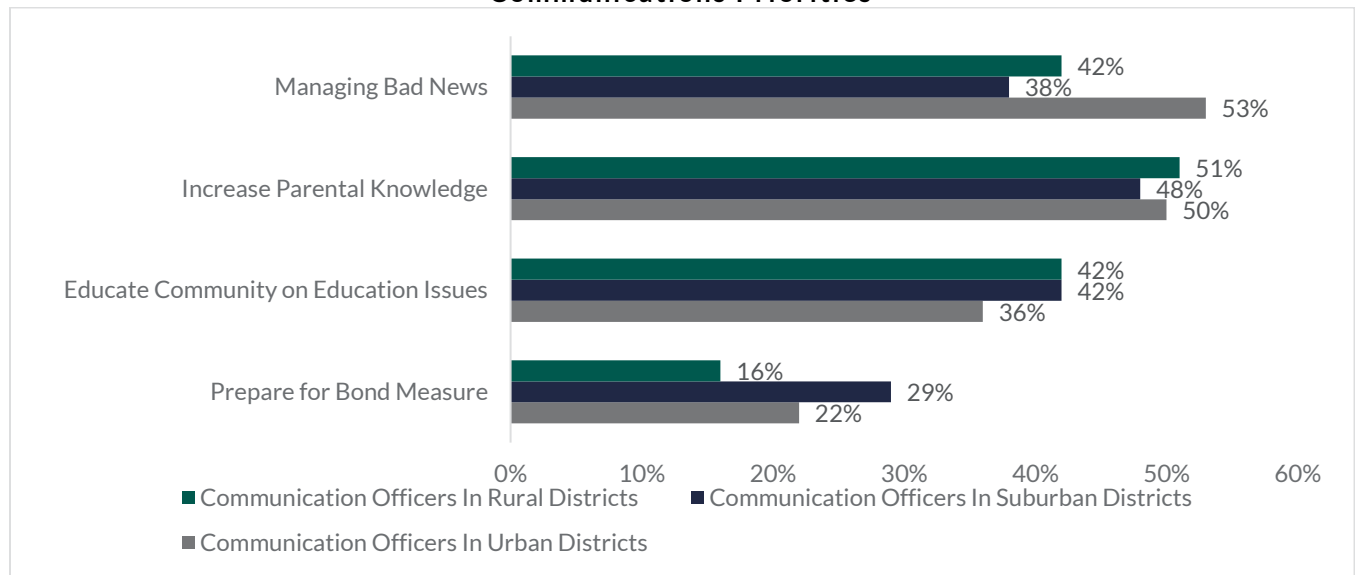
Additionally, the IES notes educators benefit from training in basic communication methods. This training may cover skills such as "observing verbal and nonverbal behaviors, using dialogue for two-way conversations, using active listening, asking questions that are not offensive, and other skills that enhance communication and relationships with parents."⁵⁰ Training on communication methods can help district administrators, school leaders, and educators ascertain what communication mediums to use for diverse audiences. Due to a lack of internet or cultural preferences, many culturally and linguistically diverse families may prefer home visits and meetings at non-school public locations (e.g., community centers, places of worship, and libraries). Additionally, these families may feel most comfortable with informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up times, phone conferences, newsletters, and bulletin boards.⁵¹

Communication with Other Community Stakeholders

A 2015 survey by the Speak Up Project found that districts often tasked communication officers with leading all district communications as well as marketing and brand promotion responsibilities. In addition to communicating with parents, communication officers prioritized engagement with community groups, media, and key partners (e.g., local businesses) as primary target audiences.⁵² In promoting district brands to external stakeholders, communication officers emphasized increasing district awareness, sharing its accomplishments, and building community confidence in local schools.

Depending on the district's location, the survey revealed communication officers further prioritized engagement with certain community stakeholder groups of those listed above. For instance, in suburban districts, communication officers often prioritized collaborations with key partners over community group connections and media relations.⁵³ Additionally, the survey found the district's location determined its communication officers' (e.g., PIOs) messaging priorities to community stakeholders (see Figure 2.8).

Figure 2.8: Communication Officers' Identification of Information Management Tasks as Communications Priorities

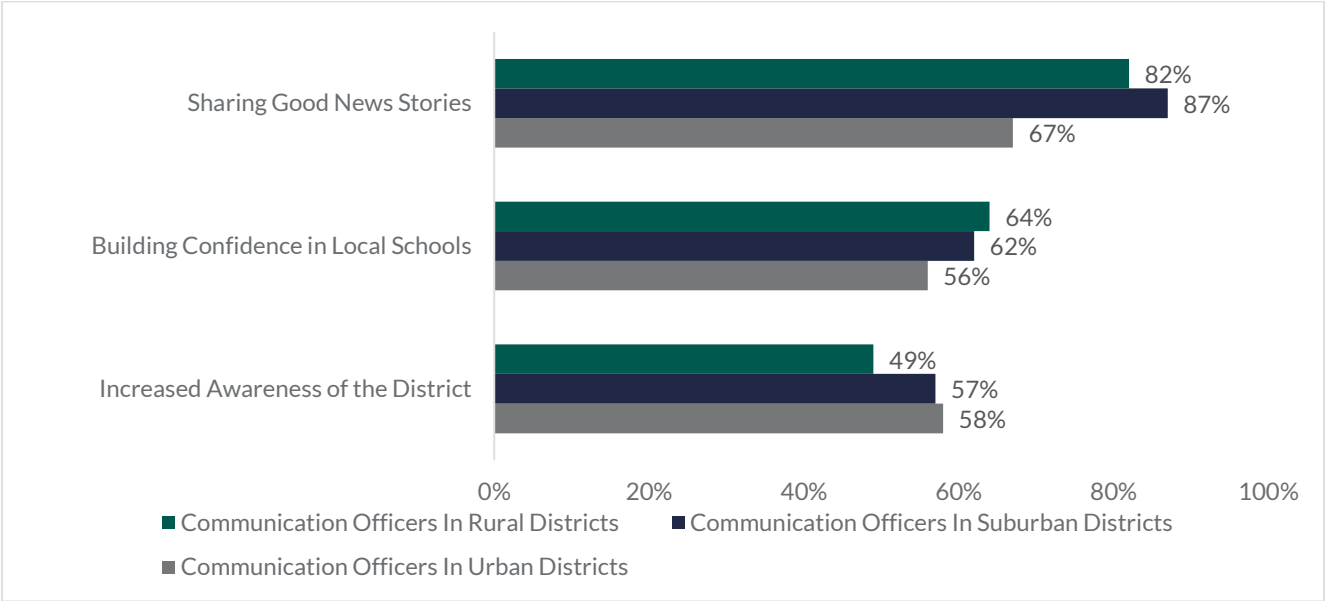


Source: Blackboard⁵⁴

Communication officers at urban and suburban school districts listed bad news management and educating community stakeholders on education issues as their most important responsibilities for disseminating information to the public. Notably, 53 percent of communication officers in urban districts reported bad news management as their top communication priority on the Speak Up Project survey. Also, over 35 percent of urban and suburban communication officers highlighted educating community stakeholders on current education issues.⁵⁵ These findings suggest BSD's PIO should highlight crisis management and provide the media, community non-profit groups, and local businesses with information on education issues as core communication responsibilities. The PIO may occasionally need to create and promote community support for ballot measures that provide additional school funding.

Compared to urban and rural districts, a significantly higher percentage of communication officers in suburban districts reported prioritizing sharing district accomplishments. The Speak Up Project also found that 87 percent of communications officers at suburban school districts described publicizing accomplishments as a brand-building priority, higher than their peers in urban (67 percent) and rural districts (82 percent). Those figures "may have to do with competitive pressures from private schools and other public school districts in attracting families to their schools. Presenting a positive image to a greater community is increasingly a priority."⁵⁶ Most communication officers in urban and suburban districts also noted a responsibility to increase community stakeholder awareness of their schools and create community trust in the public schools (see Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9: Communication Officers’ Identification of Brand Building Tasks as Communications Priorities



Source: Blackboard⁵⁷

Individualized Communications

Community stakeholders find individualized and personalized communications most helpful and valuable, regardless of the communication method or tool. The CAP survey discussed the stakeholders’ value systems that facilitate individualized interaction and communication most highly out of all communication options used at their school.⁵⁸ For example, Sunnyvale School District (CA) shares how the public can receive and customize communications and information from the district through a public page on the district’s website. Figure 2.10 displays Sunnyvale School District’s (SSD’s) communication platforms to communicate with community stakeholders.

Figure 2.10: Sunnyvale School District (CA)

Text Messages: Students can sign up for urgent messages by texting “YES” to 67587 and opt-out anytime.

PowerSchool Parent Portal: Students and parents have access to real-time information, including attendance, grades, lunch balances, detailed assignment descriptions, and school bulletins, through this electronic student management system. Teachers can share information with parents and students, and parents can participate in their child’s education. Students and parents can also change or update their contact information and their communication preferences through the portal.

The District Digest is a quarterly online newsletter published by the SSD covering programs, happenings, and issues affecting schools, the district, and public education. Community members can subscribe to receive a condensed digest.

Social Media: Half of SSD’s schools have social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) in addition to the district’s accounts. Community members can follow any of the channels.

Mobile App: Students and parents can download SSD’s free mobile app from the iOS App Store or Google Play to follow and receive news/notifications from specific schools. Users can customize the app, including language preferences, individual student information, push notifications, SSD’s events calendar, and a district/school directory.

Peachjar: Create and distribute district- or school-approved electronic flyers directly to parents’ inboxes and posts them online to each school’s website, where parents can find and view them and immediately sign up for activities and events. Parents can click the Peachjar button on school websites to receive flyers. They do not need to log in to receive or view flyers and can opt-out anytime.

Source: Sunnyvale School District⁵⁹



Tool Explanation

The tools in this section are designed to guide leaders through creating a communication plan for their stakeholders. Figure 2.11 has a detailed description of each tool.

FIGURE 2.11: MARKETING YOUR DISTRICT TOOLS

TOOL NAME	DESCRIPTION
Data Sharing Tracker	This tool should be updated anytime new information needs to be shared with stakeholders. At the end of the school year, revisit this document to see if communication with stakeholders was maintained appropriately.
Stakeholder Communication Plan	This document will walk the team through deciding the best forms of communication for each stakeholder group, what they will communicate, how frequently, and who is responsible for it.
Resource Catalog: Creating an Inclusive Website	Review the resources in this catalog and compare what you learn to the district website. With the website being a place that all stakeholders and potential stakeholders can access at any time, it must be accessible to all users.



Data Sharing Tracker

Directions: This form can help track data sharing with the required stakeholders.

DATA TO BE SHARED	STAKEHOLDERS WHO NEED THIS INFORMATION	HOW OFTEN SHOULD EACH STAKEHOLDER BE UPDATED	DID THE TEAM UPDATE THE STAKEHOLDERS ON THE TOPIC AND WITH THE FREQUENCY THEY DECIDED?



Stakeholder Communication Plan

Directions: This form can help you plan for the types of communication for each stakeholder. You will need to decide on the kind of media, the information being shared, the frequency of communication, and who is responsible for getting the information out. Some stakeholders may get communication through multiple media. An example has been provided to help guide your work.

STAKEHOLDERS	MEDIA TYPE	WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW	FREQUENCY	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE
<i>Example:</i> Community members	<i>Newsletter</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>How implementation is going</i> ▪ <i>How they can get involved</i> ▪ <i>Upcoming events</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Quarterly</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Jane Doe- writes the newsletter.</i> ▪ <i>Moshe Cohen- sends out the newsletter.</i>
	<i>Twitter</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Upcoming events</i> ▪ <i>Pictures</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>At least weekly</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Juan Perez</i>
[Principals]				
[District administrators]				
[Parents]				
[Students]				
[Local school board members]				

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STAKEHOLDERS	MEDIA TYPE	WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW	FREQUENCY	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE
[Teachers union or union representatives]				
[Teacher leader/ teacher voice organization members or fellows]				
[Professional organizations]				
[Civil rights groups]				
[Local business leaders]				
[Higher education partners]				
[Policymakers, state, and local education leaders]				
[Researchers and technical experts]				
[Other (legislators? Media?)]				

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STAKEHOLDERS	MEDIA TYPE	WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW	FREQUENCY	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				
[Other]				



Creating an Inclusive Website Resource Catalog

Directions: The following resources provide additional information about creating an inclusive website. A set of reflection/discussion questions is provided for each type of resource to help you apply the content learned using individual resources.

RESOURCE CATALOG

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<u>Accessibility, Usability, and Inclusion</u>	Defines the similarities and differences between accessibility, usability, and inclusion. It contains links to help website creators learn more about how to create accessible and inclusive websites for people with and without disabilities.
<u>Inclusive Design: 11 Ways to Make Your Website More Accessible in 2021</u>	Discusses specific elements web designers need to consider and address when creating an inclusive website.
<u>How to Make Your Website Inclusive: A Webmaster's Guide</u>	Describes various disabilities that could cause users to struggle with a website if it is not designed to be inclusive. It also discusses common web design flaws and steps designers should never skip when creating an inclusive website.
<u>Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1</u>	Guidelines produced by World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the main international standards organization for the World Wide Web, define how to make web content more accessible to people with disabilities.

Source: Multiple⁶⁰

RESOURCE CATALOG REFLECTION QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS
Does the current district website contain the inclusion elements mentioned on these websites? How do you know?
What changes must be made to align the current website with the district's communication goals?
What is the approval process for making changes to the website?
Who is responsible for the district website and making changes? How difficult is it to make changes?

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Overview

With the growing popularity of charter schools and the trend of parents comparing public school systems and then changing districts so their children can attend their preferred schools, districts' ability to engage and retain parents and students has become essential to sustained school success.⁶¹ The following section outlines how schools can survey parent communication needs and assess their outreach strategy.

Survey Parent Communication Preferences

Districts should survey parents to efficiently collect feedback on school communication methods and educational programming. Communities that seek parent communication preferences can tailor outreach to parent needs, increasing the likelihood that school messaging will be received and reciprocated.⁶² Surveys can also elicit feedback on the degree to which parents feel welcome in school, parent confidence in helping their children learn at home, the degree to which parents feel included in school decision-making, and how parents feel about school programming.⁶³ Figure 3.1 provides a sample communication preferences survey districts, schools, or teachers can share with parents at the outset of the school year.

FIGURE 3.1: COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES SURVEY SAMPLE

How would you like to receive communication (i.e. email, text, letters, social media)?

How often would you like to receive school communication?

What kind of information would you like to receive (i.e. academic performance, school activities)?

How would you like to contact teachers or the school?

What have you liked about past school communication?

Source: Education Endowment Foundation⁶⁴

In addition to formal surveys, districts can set up informal meetings that empower parents to share ideas and feedback.⁶⁵ Informal meetings serve the dual purpose of validating parents' concerns and allowing parents to connect. If districts think it would be helpful, they can facilitate guided activities for eliciting feedback. Districts can also invite teachers to join feedback meetings so parents and teachers can form relationships and work together. If specific parents are difficult to engage, districts should shift outreach efforts to one-on-one communications.⁶⁶

Schools should ensure they are reaching parents of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds when collecting feedback, and if not, implement strategies to increase inclusive engagement.⁶⁷ Families who face barriers to school communication or who have had negative past experiences with public schools may be hesitant to provide feedback, including parents who do not speak English as their first language, parents of color who experience discrimination, and LGBTQ parents who may not feel accepted by the school community.⁶⁸ To help families feel comfortable giving feedback, districts should ensure communication is culturally competent and available in families' primary language.⁶⁹ Districts who struggle to reach parents can also schedule home visits. Research shows home visits are a successful way to connect with hard-to-reach families.

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In cases where trust is lacking between parents and the school, a home visit can signal that the school cares about the student and is invested in hearing and implementing parent feedback.⁷⁰

PLAN AND ASSESS - DISTRICT OUTREACH STRATEGY

Districts should engage parents by ensuring clear, consistent, and individualized school communication. Schools that communicate with parents regularly surrounding student academic achievement and school initiatives see increased parent engagement. However, research shows that most U.S. public schools do not regularly communicate with families. The National Parent Involvement Engagement Survey from the Center for American Progress (CAP) showed in the 2015-2016 school year, 42 percent of parents never received a phone call from their child's school with personalized information, and 62 percent of parents never received an email from their child's school with personalized information. Recent research by CAP shows parents care more that school communication is personalized than how they receive it.⁷¹ Figure 3.2 provides reflection questions for districts to consider when personalizing communication with parents to help design an approach that is thoughtful, deliberate, and appropriately timed.

FIGURE 3.2 PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATION REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What existing dynamics should inform your approach?

- History of outreach and relationship-building with parents.
- Power dynamics to be mindful of.

What is the purpose of engaging parents?

- To seek input to strengthen and refine the emerging plan?
- To inform or provide updates on process?

How frequently will you engage parents?

- Regularly (e.g., weekly, daily)?
- At the beginning, middle, and end of the planning process?
- At the end only?

How will you engage them?

- Weekly in-person updates?
- Quarterly email updates?

Source: Bellwether Education Partners⁷²

Districts can form a community engagement team to ensure long-term sustainable and effective communication with families. The community engagement team should create goals for family engagement at the beginning of the school year and report on growth at the end of the school year.⁷³ The community engagement team can also use feedback from parent surveys to streamline and improve systems of parent outreach.⁷⁴ The community engagement team should include district leaders, school leaders, staff, and parents, whose roles are outlined in Figure 3.3 to guide districts in forming their engagement team.

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FIGURE 3.3: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TEAM ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

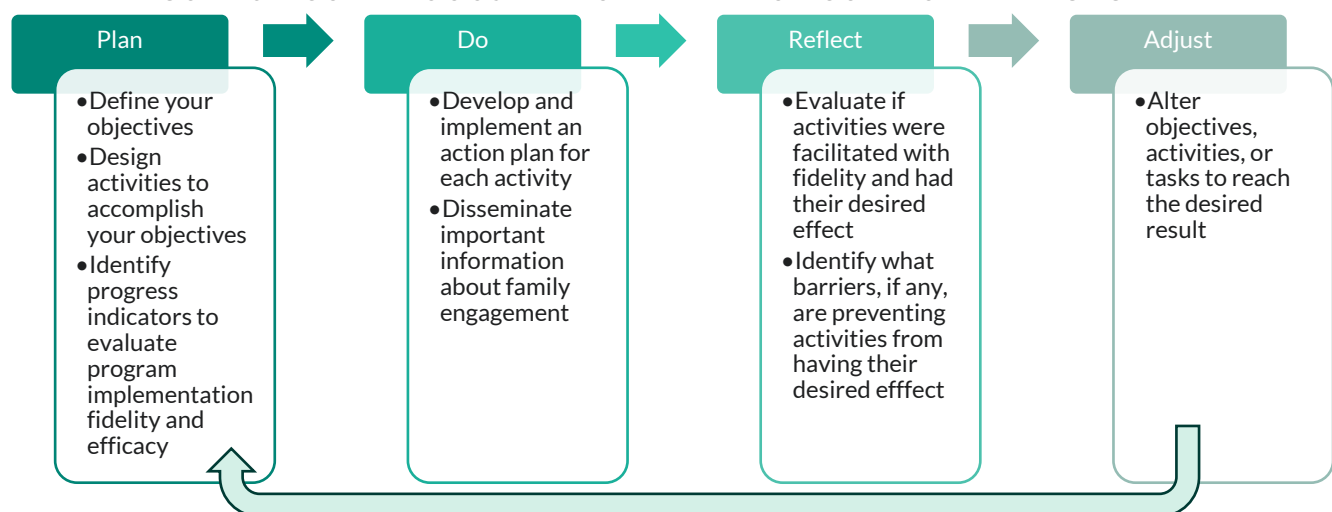
BOARD OF TRUSTEES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies district needs in family engagement Provides examples of integration of family engagement objectives in district plans Provides indicators of successful family engagement
SUPERINTENDENT AND DISTRICT LEADERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assembles resources needed for implementation of family engagement activities Provides data on results of district and school family engagement activities Identifies methods the district can use to build the capacity of educators to partner with families
SITE ADMINISTRATORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversees alignment of school family engagement plans and objectives with school and district student learning goals Identifies staff available to support family engagement Implements evaluation methods for family engagement
TEACHERS AND STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implements strategies for linking family engagement to student learning objectives Participates in professional learning opportunities to increase their skills in partnering with families Implements strategies to foster two-way communication with families
ADVISORY COMMITTEE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides available resources for family engagement Oversees district and school family engagement policy development and evaluation Helps team increase their knowledge and skills related to decision-making

Source: California Department of Education⁷⁵

Parents on the committee, usually on the board of trustees or the advisory committee, can help coordinate with and pass the information to other parent groups and community organizations. Parent committee members can also help post helpful information online for district families.⁷⁶ The community engagement team can coordinate with other teams, such as the curriculum team, to collaborate and streamline communication.⁷⁷

The district communication team should use a continuous improvement model to assess and improve community engagement regularly.⁷⁸ When engaging in constant improvement, districts should consider parent needs and preferences when targeting areas for growth.⁷⁹ The stages of the continuous improvement cycle are plan, do, reflect, and adjust, as described in Figure 3.4.

FIGURE 3.4 CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Source: California Department of Education⁸⁰

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When engaging in continuous improvement, districts should ensure they are infusing equity considerations into every step of the implementation process to ensure school communication planning considers all populations in the school district. If districts do not plan communication initiatives with an equity mindset, districts may inadvertently center policies solely on mainstream American cultural values, making some parent populations feel excluded.⁸¹ Figure 3.5 provides sample objectives and guiding equity questions.

FIGURE 3.5 SAMPLE OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING EQUITY QUESTIONS

SAMPLE OBJECTIVE AND ACTIVITIES			
OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITIES		
The environment at all district schools is welcoming to all families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Prepare family-friendly information materials in multiple languages.■ Provide professional development to all staff in cultural responsiveness.■ Hire, train, and supervise family liaisons to serve as point people to develop family engagement at all school sites.■ Provide professional development to site administrators on the value and importance of engaging diverse families and on strategies to engage diverse families.■ Guide school sites for days when family members are invited to observe classrooms.		
EQUITY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER			
PLAN	DO	REFLECT	ADJUST
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Are parent and community leaders from our diverse school communities involved in planning activities?■ Are we planning targeted outreach to all our families?■ How will we engage parents and community leaders in reaching their communities?■ Are we providing information that is easily understood?■ Are we providing information translated into the home languages of our families?■ Do families of English-only students have an opportunity to learn about the importance of programs for English Learners?■ Are we providing opportunities for educators to listen to the experiences of all our families?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Have we considered how diverse staff and families access information in the district?■ Do we need to make our communication materials available in different languages?■ Have we used easily understandable terminology and avoided education jargon?■ Have we explained all acronyms?■ Have we indicated where staff and families can get more information and who to talk to if they have questions or want to get more involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Which families are participating in the activities we planned?■ How did feedback on activities vary between schools or between different communities?■ What are some indicators that family engagement may contribute to improved student outcomes at different schools or communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Do we need to change the objectives to align with the district’s goals?■ Should we continue the same activities?■ If we continue, how can we make activities more effective?■ What other activities should we substitute or add?

Source: California Department of Education⁸²

School districts can use a rubric to ensure thorough and holistic community engagement. Albuquerque Public Schools uses a rubric that measures family engagement in seven areas: Communication; Strengthening Relationships and Capacity; Connecting Learning at Home and

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School; Recognizing the Role of the Family; Shared Decision Making; Collaborating with the Community; and Participating. Figure 3.6 defines these areas. Districts can access Albuquerque's rubric [here](#).⁸³

FIGURE 3.6: ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT RUBRIC



Source: Albuquerque Public Schools⁸⁴

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Tool Explanation

The tools in this section are designed to guide you through creating a communication plan for their stakeholders and reflecting on how to make the district website more inclusive. Figure 3.7 includes a detailed description of each tool.

FIGURE 3.7: ADVOCATING FOR YOUR DISTRICT TOOLS

TOOL NAME	DESCRIPTION
<u>Communication Team Creation Sheet</u>	Leaders can use the questions in this document to facilitate conversations about orienting the Communication Team. Space is provided below each question to record notes.
<u>Personalized Communication Reflection Sheet</u>	This reflection sheet, which can be completed individually or as a communications team, asks questions that will help the responder(s) design a communication plan that is thoughtful, deliberate, and appropriately timed.
<u>Action Planning Steps</u>	This resource outlines the six steps of action planning. This information will help the communication leader or team create a solid communication plan.
<u>Action Planning Worksheet</u>	This document allows communication leaders or teams to outline the changes they want to occur and the steps to reach their objectives. The basis of this document stems from the six stages of the action planning process.

Communication Team Creation Sheet

Directions: Use the questions in this document to facilitate conversations about orienting the Communication Team. Space is provided below each question to record notes.

What leaders, both district and site, would fit this team well?

How many teachers from each level do we want? Should we have someone from each school?

Where should we look for parent members? How many parents do we want on the committee?

What community members would be a good fit for this work?

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List all of the people you are considering from all stakeholder groups. Discuss if each person has the following qualities needed to complete the work: *Commitment, Courage, Cognizance of bias, Curiosity, Cultural intelligence, and Collaborative nature.*

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FINAL COMMUNICATION TEAM MEMBER LIST AND CONTACT INFORMATION

[illegible]Source: Multiple⁸⁵

Personalized Communication Reflection Sheet

Directions: Answer the following reflection questions, individually or as a communications team, to help design a communication plan that is thoughtful, deliberate, and appropriately timed.

1. What **existing dynamics** should inform your approach?

Things to consider: history of outreach, relationship-building with parents, and power dynamics to be mindful of.

2. What is the **purpose** of engaging parents?

Questions to consider: To seek input to strengthen and refine the emerging plan? To inform or provide updates on the process?

3. How **frequently** will you engage parents?

Questions to consider: Regularly (e.g., weekly, daily)? At the beginning, middle, and end of the planning process? At the end only?

4. **How** will you engage them?

Questions to consider: Weekly in-person updates? Quarterly email updates?

Source: Bellwether Education Partners⁸⁶



Action Planning Steps

The graphic on this page contains information on the six steps of the action planning process, which can be used for the planning phase of the community engagement plan.

Step 1: Decide what must be achieved

- This is the “what” – the result that the activities are supposed to achieve. Once you are clear on the what, you are ready to work out the steps to take to arrive there.

Step 2: Decide what steps are involved

- Before you can detail the steps, you need to reach agreement about a strategy for arriving at the desired result
- Once agreed upon, list out the steps the strategy requires

Step 3: Decide when steps must occur

- Working out when each step needs to happen requires that you:
 - 1. Identify a date by when the required result must have been achieved
 - 2. Establish a realistic starting date for carrying out the activities needed to achieve the result
 - 3. Calculate how much time each step needs
 - 4. Clarify what needs to happen before the activity can be carried out and how much time that is likely to take
 - 5. Clarify what needs to happen after the activity is carried out and how much time that is likely to take

Step 4: Decide who is responsible for each step

- Each step in the process needs to be specifically assigned to someone to carry out
- Assigning an step holds someone specifically accountable for its implementation, which will help ensure it is carried out

Step 5: Determine what resources are needed

- The resources or inputs that are normally needed for activities are:
 - Finances
 - People
 - Materials
 - Services
 - Transport

Action Planning Worksheet

Directions: This worksheet is designed to walk the communication team through the action planning process. This layout is designed for one objective at a time.

Objective

What is this objective asking us to achieve?

What strategy will we use to achieve this objective?

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Step Description	Responsible Party	Start Date	End Date	Resources Required	Outcome

Source: Civicus⁸⁷

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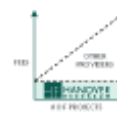
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