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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Adding student work to your content strategy

As you sketch your school communication strategies, consider how you can involve students' work.

There are many benefits. Parents, taxpayers, and staff members learn from reading, seeing, and hearing first-hand student experiences. The process of creating these submissions enables students to broaden and apply their communication skills, and their storytelling can expand the content and reach of your communication channels. And they may stand a better chance of getting difficult messages across to parents and guardians, from guidance on why not to be a helicopter parent to why consistent school attendance matters so much. After all, youth are the experts on their lives.

For school communicators, there also are at least three self-serving — but very worthwhile — reasons to incorporate student submissions. One is that students bring energy, which can be a refreshing antidote to a draining day at the office. A second is that students always are doing something interesting, and often want to share their news, so there is no shortage of material. A third is the reality that the student becomes the teacher: working with students will improve your skills and understandings in unexpected ways.

You might start by brainstorming ways for student involvement. Think broadly. Consider:

- The outlets: school district, individual schools, classrooms, parent/teacher/student groups, businesses, civic organizations, local governments, news media, and others.
- The methods: websites, social media, newsletters, meetings, public events, and others.
- The format: videos; essays, letters and other writings; soundtracks; photographs; computer programs; and in-person speeches and presentations.
- The student work: original content produced for your distribution; work done for a class or club project; or work put together with the help of a teacher, coach, club adviser or another adult.

### Student content strategy

The options are so widespread that you could spend all your time curating student submissions. Instead, find opportunities that offer good returns on your time investment, add something new or different to your communications, and/or target a specific audience or need.

For example, student submissions can help get the school year off to a strong start for students and families. Pre-K and kindergarten students certainly will have different contributions in this regard than high school seniors, but all can be valuable to your audiences.

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Because a new academic year can be scary, peer stories can help alleviate those fears. High school students could put together video interviews with students and/or staff on such topics as “What it’s like going to school here,” “How to make new friends in school,” or “What I wish I’d known on the first day of school (with answers).”

Young students could be asked to list words to describe their classroom or their school day. Their communications might be put together as a photograph, collage or composite video of interview snippets, which would entail help from staff. In any case, the project should start in the previous school year so it will be ready before the new year.

### **Tips for a productive student newsroom**

Here are things to keep in mind, whether you are dealing directly with student submitters or working through district staff:

- Think about how you will solicit contributions, how you will graciously weed them out if there are too many, and how you will encourage more if there are too few.
- Tap into interests, such as a student’s desire to put together a regular sports podcast, a review of the week’s scientific advancements or a cooking show.
- Capitalize on already produced work, such as student radio, TV or newspaper stories that you can republish through your channels.
- Be clear, without going overboard, about what you’re seeking. Your role is to encourage opportunity, not throw up obstacles.
- Treat the students with the same respect and cordiality as you would anyone else. As much as possible, these presentations should be done from the students’ perspective. They need to be authentic, not perfect, so a light editing touch is preferable. On the other hand, the results should not embarrass or make fun of anyone.
- Have clear deadlines and, as necessary, check-ins with students. Help them learn and apply the stages of project development, such as through using Gantt charts or project management tools. What is important is that they get the work done in time for your use, so be willing to bend arbitrary deadlines as necessary, and permit them to develop better work habits over time. As with any project, build in time for things to go wrong.
- Listen for the students’ questions instead of making assumptions.
- Seek ideas from district staff about students who could contribute submissions — whether something prepared for you or something already done. (My first professionally published piece was a vocabulary essay written for my 10th grade English class that my teacher, Mrs. Abernethy, suggested I submit to the local newspaper as a letter to the editor.)
- Appreciate that everyone is overworked. Look for mutually beneficial opportunities to capitalize on what students, classes and clubs already are doing.
- Create templates so you don’t have to reinvent the relevant information each time.
- Only ask for as much as you can handle.
- Have fun. Keep brainstorming.