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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Update your communications plan

You spent a lot of time developing your district's communications plan, and it has served you well this past year. But with a new school year looming, it's time to give it another look.

Communication plans are not a one-and-done proposition. They need to be revisited annually to make sure they continue to address the communications needs in your district. As new issues arise, you need to incorporate strategies to address them. As circumstances change, you may need to tweak or add new elements to your plan.

The "secret sauce" in a good school communications plan is to involve those groups you want to communicate with, especially parents. Often districts talk "at" parents, rather than "with" them. They are good at sending out newsletters, emails and social media posts that provide information but don't allow for two-way dialogue. While those types of communications have their place, it's important that communication plans also include strategies for listening to parents and reacting to what you learn from them. That goes for staff too. By doing so, you show them that you value their experience, ideas and opinions and take their concerns seriously. That helps build strong relationships and gives you an ear to the ground to know what your various audiences think and feel about their schools.

An easy way to do this is to hold regular "listening" sessions. It could be the superintendent, principal or school board members who invite parents, staff or other groups to come for coffee and snacks and share whatever concerns or ideas they may have.

Another strategy is to include one or more parents on every committee or task force that the school board appoints. This provides an avenue for parents to actively participate in discussions around important issues in the district.

With COVID-19, the need for clear, consistent communications became more critical than ever. New information became available almost daily, but districts were challenged by restrictions that didn't allow for face-to-face gatherings. So districts found new tools for communicating with patrons, including Zoom and Google Meet. A pleasant surprise was that school board meetings that previously drew a handful of patrons often had dozens and sometimes hundreds of attendees.

Many districts plan to incorporate Zoom meetings into their communication plans even after school boards and other groups are able to meet fully in person. It can be a way to be more inclusive and include parents and others who may not be able to attend an in-person meeting because of child care or other issues but would still like to engage with the district.

A key step for districts will be to evaluate the effectiveness of any new communication tools they used this past year and survey different audiences (parents, staff, community, etc.) about their preferred communication channels and frequency of communications. That

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will help districts tailor their communications using tools that patrons are most likely to actually use.

Communication is not a “one-size-fits-all process,” so districts cannot rely on just a single communication method to reach all of their audiences. Some parents are glued to social media; others never use it. Some like visiting the district website. Not all parents can be reached in the same way, so it’s important to develop a few reliable communication tools and then let patrons know that these will be the tools used for reaching out.

### **Why develop a communication plan?**

Having a written communication plan helps you do thoughtful, strategic planning and stay focused throughout the year. It’s not meant to be a static document that just sits on a shelf. It needs to be updated regularly to reflect the changing needs in your district. The time you spend on developing and updating your plan at the start of school can save you time later on because you’ll know exactly what you need to do at any point during the year.

Another benefit of a written plan is that it gives you a structure for deciding what you want to do and who you want to target for your communications. Each group of stakeholders has unique characteristics. Through planning, you can identify the most effective ways to communicate with them.

There are several key steps to developing a communication plan.

- 1. Identify the purpose of your communication.** What you say (and the tool you use to communicate) depends on what you’re trying to accomplish. Are you trying to educate the public about a bond measure? Increase parent engagement? More actively engage families of color? Once you’re specific about what you are trying to accomplish, you will be able to better target your audience and methods of communication.
- 2. Identify your audience.** You’ll need different messages for different groups, and you may need different channels and methods to reach each of those groups. What does your intended audience read, listen to or watch on TV? Where do they gather? It’s important to place your message where they’ll see it and believe it. For instance, those aged 60 and older tend to like printed materials and are likely to read materials that come in the mail as well as articles in the newspaper. Younger adults are more likely to read electronic posts. Hispanic families often tune in to Spanish-language radio and television stations. By being strategic in placing information, you won’t be continuously pulled in different directions.
- 3. Consider your resources.** What do you have the money to do? Do you have the people to make it possible? If you’re going to spend money, will the results be worth the expense? Your communication plan should take into account how much you can spend and how much staff time it is reasonable to use. There are a variety of communication tools available, some that cost nothing more than your time, such as presentations to community groups or posting on social media. Other expenses are specific to your targeted audience. Did you budget for food and child care? Experience shows that Hispanic families turn out in higher numbers if food and child care are provided. Those considerations should be part of your planning process.
- 4. Evaluate.** Review your strategies at least annually to make sure they are producing the results you desire.

It takes work to develop a good communication plan, but the payoff is worth it. Good communications help build understanding and trust, and those are key elements in building positive partnerships with parents and other patrons.

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*Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant*